

Women's Economic Empowerment in Jalisco

Evaluating the Co-Meta Initiative and Collective Impact

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Executive Summary

In the state of Jalisco, Mexico, men’s rate of economic participation is 78 per cent, while the rate for women is only 45 per cent. This stark difference represents a 33 per cent gender gap in economic participation in the labour force. Because of historical, social and cultural barriers, the economic prospects for women remain quite low. ProSociedad launched the Co-Meta initiative to address this structural inequality. Co-Meta mobilizes a network of local economic and social actors who support women’s economic empowerment. The network connects business leaders from across Jalisco to act as mentors and instructors with marginalized women in the region.

This Reach Alliance research project, in collaboration with ITESO Universidad and ProSociedad, seeks to generate new and actionable knowledge focused on strengthening the Co-Meta Initiative’s delivery and framework. The initiative is modelled after the idea of collective impact — an intervention approach in which actors from different backgrounds join together to pursue a common goal. Researchers expand on the collective impact framework and suggest that a strong and effective program requires: a common agenda, mutually reinforcing activities, a “backbone” function, continuous communication, a shared measurement system, training, organizational trust, capacity building and funding, an equity and community lens and systems change.

We interviewed network actors and program implementers to glean useful insights into how Co-Meta operates and to identify opportunities for improvement. Our evaluation of Co-Meta uses each of the collective impact elements to organize insights and recommendations resulting from our research. Key recommendations for Co-Meta to improve program delivery and increase its impact focus on effective communication, baseline training, offboarding and monitoring and evaluation.

Economic State of Women in Mexico: Co-Meta's Context

According to the 2018 National Survey of Occupation and Employment, only 42 per cent of women older than 15 years of age are employed compared with 75 per cent of men of the same age in Mexico. In the state of Jalisco, these statistics do not differ significantly from the national statistics, given that the same survey confirms that men's rate of economic participation is 78 per cent, while the rate for women is only 45 per cent. This stark difference represents a 33 per cent gender gap in economic participation.¹

Women participate significantly less than men in the paid work sphere of the economy, and those who do participate face income and gender inequalities. National statistics indicate that over 40 per cent of employed men had an income that amounts to two times the minimum wage, while only 28 per cent of employed women received an equal amount. In Jalisco 53 per cent of working women receive two times the minimum wage or less, while only 27 per cent of working men in the state are in that situation.²

Estimates indicate that raising the levels of women's employability costs around 5 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) for countries throughout the world,³ but the benefits are much greater. Several studies have shown that the economic empowerment of women leads to an increase in investment in their children, an increase in life aspirations and ultimately poverty reduction.

The barriers that women face to exercise their rights to economic participation have a complex historical background. Many of them are structural, such as stereotypes, gender roles, societal beliefs, norms and values associated with gender. These structural barriers are ubiquitous in the *machismo* culture in Mexico. This culture limits women's aspirations because their partners are directly in control of their finances. Consequently, women are not seen as independent economic agents who can make financial decisions.

The direct consequences are women's low labour expectations, the unequal division of unpaid care work, low technical skills, limited support networks and financial exclusion. These barriers are higher for women with low income and low education levels. According to the Encuesta Nacional de Ocupación y Empleo (National Survey of Occupation and Employment — ENOE), in Mexico, the average trimestral income of women is lower depending on their level of education.⁴ Many women also lack educational credentials and have no second-chance opportunities to obtain them.

On an individual level, many women are financially dependent on their partner or spouse, as well as on other members of their family, which may also increase their risk for domestic violence. At a societal level, women's low economic empowerment contributes to greater intergenerational poverty and the reproduction of negative-stereotyped gender roles and social norms that exclude women from the workforce and economic decision making, sustaining the gendered division of labour and the undervaluation of women's contribution to the labour force.

1 Magdalena Rodríguez, "Co-Meta: A Collective Impact Experience to Promote Economic Empowerment of Women in Jalisco: The Problem of the Low Economic Empowerment of Women," *Social Innovations Journal* 53 (2019). [↗](#)

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

The Co-Meta Initiative: Empowering Women Economically

To address these gender inequities, the Co-Meta Initiative was launched in 2016 by ProSociedad, a sustainable development agency. The name Co-Meta has many meanings. The Latin prefix *co-* refers to sharing action, and *meta* means goal so the word emphasizes the methodology behind the initiative: many organizations work together toward the shared goal of women's economic empowerment. Additionally, the Spanish word *cometa* translates as *comet*, which represents the notion of flying high and reaching great heights. This aligns with Co-Meta's aim which is to create better economic opportunities for women.

The initiative mobilizes a network of local economic and social actors who support women's economic empowerment in Jalisco, Mexico. It facilitates personal development training projects for low-income women who have minimal financial prospects. The program's design is based on the Building Resources Across Communities (formerly Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee — BRAC) ultra-poor graduation model, a framework of sustainable development that aims to "graduate" individuals from extreme poverty through financial inclusion and social integration.⁵ Through the Co-Meta initiative, women are taught technical skills to apply in the marketplace to increase their standard of living. There are many classes participants can choose from, with topics including: concrete design, florist training, and food preparation. These classes combine technical training with other skills development (teamwork, organization and financial management/planning). Participants also receive mentorship alongside their course work. ProSociedad was closely involved in the initiative's development and played a key role

in facilitating the network of actors who are responsible for the social and economic well-being of the program participants and who have helped to advance social cohesion within the community.

The Co-Meta Initiative network aims to create a safe space for women and act as a positive force for rebuilding the social fabric. It has already mobilized in excess of five million pesos (roughly CAD 300,000), and has reached over 130 women in Guadalajara.⁶ With the support of the UN Women Second Chance Education and Vocational Training (SCE) Programme, Co-Meta expects to reach 1,500 women by 2021.

Several entities fund this initiative, including the National Council of Science and Technology (CONACYT) and the Secretary of Innovation, Science and Technology of Mexico. Co-Meta is aided by ITESO University in Guadalajara and the Tecnológico de Monterrey, among a number of other institutions. The initiative has also received support from the Secretary of Substantive Equality between Women and Men, Hewlett-Packard Foundation and United Nations Women (within the UN's SCE Programme).

Co-Meta is a network, a platform and an approach for local women's economic empowerment. In a nutshell, Co-Meta connects business leaders across Jalisco to act as mentors and instructors for marginalized women in the region. Additionally, it links with funding agencies and the government to sustain its activities. It was formed within the adopted framework of a larger project called Jalisco Sin Hambre (Jalisco without Hunger). ProSociedad facilitated empirical investigations of economic empowerment initiatives worldwide, the adaptation of the Co-Meta Initiative to the Jalisco context and the initial program evaluation and subsequent scaling of the initiative to other regions of Jalisco.

5 Lamia Rashid, "BRAC's Ultra-Poor Graduation Programme: An End to Extreme Poverty in Our Lifetime," BRAC, April 2017. [🔗](#)

6 Magdalena Rodríguez, "Co-Meta: A Collective Impact Experience."

The collective impact (CI) approach informs Co-Meta's design and implementation.⁷ CI involves a network of actors with varied skills working together toward economic empowerment. Our project assessed the strength of Co-Meta's CI framework, and identified how closely it abides by the key dimensions of CI as outlined in the literature. As an approach, CI is garnering significant attention internationally. It brings together different stakeholders to solve a complex issue in society, in this case, economic empowerment for marginalized women. Our evaluation aimed to inform relevant stakeholders on how the Co-Meta Initiative works. We hope that it will strengthen the initiative so that it can develop greater capacity for self-sufficiency and mobility for individual women, and diversify economic opportunities in the region.

Through a series of qualitative interviews and literature and document review we assessed how well the project's Theory of Change (ToC) aligned with a CI approach and how access to the local network of actors might positively affect Co-Meta participants. Interviews were conducted with the network of actors including academic experts, local businesses, universities and other involved local organizations.

Participants and Key Actors

In 2018, there were nearly 80 active women participants. The participants invest between 160 and 600 pesos (between approximately CAD 10 and 38, respectively) each month in their own business ventures. Previous research conducted by ProSociedad (upon the culmination of the Jalisco Sin Hambre Initiative) found that 65 per cent of participants reported that their economic situation/prospects had improved either "somewhat" or "significantly" as a result of this program.

PROSOCIEDAD (BACKBONE ORGANIZATION)

ProSociedad acts as the "backbone" organization (a key dimension of the CI approach) that works with local actors who have a role in ensuring access to women's empowerment services. They regard themselves as "capacity builders" with the theoretical knowledge necessary to build the framework for such programs. They dialogued with local actors and began to build new approaches to deliver better services toward the common goal of women's economic empowerment, especially with and for marginalized women. ProSociedad links to more strategic actors like the state government and UN Women. They aim to accumulate greater knowledge about the relationships within the network of actors and thereby build opportunities for women.

ProSociedad consults on the women's economic empowerment agenda with the Secretary of Substantive Equality between Women and Men. In this way it has helped shape the government's approach to push for women's economic empowerment. ProSociedad also seeks to influence and change the approach the government takes when helping women in the region toward more holistic and individual targeting.

JALISCO STATE (EQUITY AND DIVERSITY)

The government of Jalisco has worked closely with ProSociedad through the Office of the Secretariat of Equity between Men and Women. This government entity provides financial aid to women with small enterprises and helps them develop marketing and interpersonal skills.

Initially, the state government and ProSociedad met through events where they realized that there was room for collaboration between the two entities. With guidance from ProSociedad, state government officials have delivered workshops to its staff about integrating gender

⁷ John Kania and Mark Kramer, "Collective Impact," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 9, no. 1 (2011): 36–41.

considerations into programming. ProSociedad has subsequently received funding from the government because of its proven expertise and the relationship of trust it has built with the state government.

UN WOMEN

UN Women's SCE Programme has four central pillars. First, they aim to create and drive high-quality education content to women who had to leave formal education. Second, they link women to employment opportunities in the community. Third, through media and information campaigns, they aim to transform discriminatory social norms against women. Fourth, they translate all these actions into policy to sustain the changes that have been made.

The initiative aims to enhance labour-market access for marginalized women. Second Chance targets areas with high need and high employment opportunities. UN Women works with partners based in the communities surrounding their community centres. ProSociedad became one of those partners after the UN evaluation found it to be a reliable and trusted organization. ProSociedad's UN proposal was based on the Co-Meta initiative as the foundation for how ProSociedad wanted to do this work.

UN Women provides administrative support. As part of capacity building, the organization facilitates administrative, contracting, consulting and procurement processes. It provides additional oversight to women's economic empowerment programs across Mexico, ensuring that they operate according to the UN's mandate.

Finally, UN Women helps ProSociedad to link political actors. For example, UN Women recently signed an agreement with the Jalisco government about the Second Chance Education

Programme. This gave a boost in legitimacy to all the organizations operating in Jalisco. UN Women fostered the relationship with the Jalisco government and helped the government implement the goals of SCE. UN Women supports ProSociedad to link their approach with public policy.

Evaluating Co-Meta's Collective Impact

Magdalena Rodríguez, a co-founder of ProSociedad, described Co-Meta as "a Collective Impact experience to promote the economic empowerment of women in Jalisco."⁸ Our goal in this project was to assess the Co-Meta Initiative's collective impact (CI) approach to identify the areas of improvement within the program's design. Prior to our research, no external evaluation of Co-Meta had been conducted to assess whether or how it was aligned with the CI framework.

Collective impact was first introduced by John Kania and Mark Kramer in 2011 and refers to an intervention approach in which actors from different backgrounds join together to pursue a common goal.⁹ They conceived CI to counter the approach to social programs that were delivered unidimensionally by one isolated actor, and identified five key characteristics for success:

1. a common agenda (the foundational goals for the initiative are agreed upon)
2. continuous communication (intentional scheduled meetings among actors for learning and debriefing)
3. a shared measurement system (consistent indicators and metrics for monitoring and evaluation so that actors have a common understanding of the initiative's progress)

8 Magdalena Rodríguez, "Co-Meta: A Collective Impact Experience," 1.

9 John Kania and Mark Kramer, "Collective Impact."

4. a backbone function (an organization chosen to coordinate the initiative, providing capacity for communication, monitoring, logistics etc.)
5. mutually reinforcing activities (each actor pursues their own set of activities that work together to accomplish the network's shared goal).

Since Kania and Kramer's 2011 publication defining the CI approach, there have been many critiques. Wolff and colleagues argued that the approach as it was initially formulated results in top-down, hierarchical forms of interventions and does not include grassroots organizations as equal partners. They emphasize the importance of addressing structural social injustices, allowing community members to have a voice in decision making toward systemic changes.¹⁰ Similarly, Barnes and colleagues have suggested that CI models routinely lack a community focus.¹¹ In response to these criticisms, Kania and Kramer amended their initial framework by adding that without an equity lens, the five key tenets of collective impact are meaningless.¹²

Barata-Cavalcanti and colleagues analyzed a community health program's use of CI, but expanded the framework beyond the five characteristics that Kania and Kramer outlined.¹³ The additional characteristics of CI they utilized focus on: context (learning culture, professional practice, capacity), individual change (individual behaviour, program awareness, community awareness) and systems change (funding flows, cultural norms and advocacy and policy).

After examining the criticisms pertaining to CI, we suggest that a strong and effective program requires:

1. a common agenda
2. continuous communication
3. a shared measurement system
4. a backbone function
5. mutually reinforcing activities
6. an equity and community lens
7. organizational trust
8. capacity building and funding
9. systems change
10. training

Network Actors in Their Own Voices

To learn about the organizations that implement, support and administer the Co-Meta Initiative, we interviewed staff who facilitate implementation, academic experts and policymakers from Prosociedad, ITESO, CONACYT, CEMEX, UN Women and Jalisco Sin Hambre. We structured our interview questions according to four types of participants: backbone organizations, implementing partner or supporter, former partners and instructors or mentors. There were three "backbone" representatives, seven implementing partners, eight instructors or mentors and one former partner interview. We tailored our questions to each type of participant, accounting for their expertise and experiences. Each interview question targeted at least one CI dimension.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with the help of a Spanish-language interpreter with program implementers, academic experts and policymakers involved in the Co-Meta Initiative. We used purposive and snowball sampling to recruit interview participants. Building on the Reach Alliance's established relationships with

10 Tom Wolff et al., "Collaborating for Equity and Justice: Moving Beyond Collective Impact," *Nonprofit Quarterly*, last modified January 9, 2017. [↗](#)

11 Melody Barnes, Paul Born, Richard Harwood, Steve Savner, Stacey Stewart, and Martin Zanghi, "Roundtable on Community Engagement and Collective Impact," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 2014. [↗](#)

12 John Kania and Mark Kramer, "The Equity Imperative in Collective Impact," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, October 6, 2015. [↗](#)

13 Olivia Barata-Cavalcanti, May May Leung, Sergio Costa, Katrina F. Mateo, Michelle Guillermin, P.C. Palmedo, Rachel Crossley, and Terry T.-K. Huang, "Assessing the Collective Impact of Community Health Programs Funded by Food and Beverage Companies: A New Community-Focused Methodology," *International Quarterly of Community Health Education* 40, no. 2 (January 2020): 75–89. [↗](#)

ProSociedad and ITESO, we identified relevant participants. This preliminary interviewee list was supplemented through secondary research and snowball referrals. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, we could not conduct in-person interviews in Jalisco. Our interviews took place between August 4 and August 27, 2020, via Zoom (which has encryption mechanisms), and we kept in contact with potential participants through WhatsApp messaging (a common communication method in Mexico) and e-mail that encrypts the connection.

All of the remote interviews were conducted in private locations to ensure that the investigators and translator were the only individuals privy to the interview content. The study involved 19 remote interviews in total. Each interview lasted 90 minutes. There were 10 English- and 9 Spanish-language interviews with the interpreter. At the beginning of each interview, we obtained verbal consent from the participant, explained the purpose of our research and answered any questions the participant might have. The interview content was semi-structured, with questions based in part on our interview guide.¹⁴

We transcribed all data from interviews. The translator provided English-version transcripts of Spanish interviews, which we took notes on and responded to. To manage and code our data, we used the qualitative data analysis software Nvivo 12. To organize our data analysis, we used the 10 dimensions of CI. *Shared measurements* refer to

data collection, data analysis, evaluation metrics or the lack thereof. *Backbone organization* is information on the main organizational pillars that make up Co-Meta, Prosociedad and ProMexico, for example. *Mutually reinforcing activities* are actions and decisions that affect all levels of Co-Meta. *Communication* involves how information is gathered and disseminated through the network. *Shared agenda* captures the baseline understanding of Co-Meta's goals that all partners should have. *Community engagement and equity lens* captures the socio-cultural contexts and the program's ability to adapt to events outside Co-Meta. This node is specific to the Co-Meta participants' experiences outside the program. *Trust between organizations* is self-explanatory. *Capacity building* captures the capacity for Co-Meta to expand. *Systems change* records views on the systemic issues in the region and Co-Meta's ability to affect macro-scaled change. *Training* captures the formal information and workshops given to facilitators and mentors in Co-Meta.

We organized data under these nodes and also coded a valence as positive, negative or inconclusive. We coded data points that fell under multiple dimensions under each relevant node and listed as inconclusive those data points that could not be coded. The results were in line with Prosociedad's internal discussions about the Co-Meta initiative, and the Co-Meta Network's response to our evaluation was positive.

14 Details about our interview questions are available in the appendices on the Reach Alliance website. [↗](#)



Women operating a stall at an outdoor market in Jalisco, Mexico [Credit: iStock.com/Skyhobo]

Themes from Interviews

Common Agendas: Economic and Social Empowerment

Interviewees agreed that Co-Meta's main goal is to promote the social and economic empowerment of marginalized women by providing accessible and comprehensive education. Some interviewees expanded on the overall goal by adding that Co-Meta also links women to job opportunities.

SYSTEMS CHANGE — CULTURAL NORMS

Some participants spoke about cultural norms and objectives, including Co-Meta's efforts to combat the machismo norms in Mexico through its support of women. Another goal they mentioned involved influencing policy and changing the social system to eliminate barriers to accessing opportunities for women.

STRONG ALLIANCES

Interviewees from ProSociedad said that Co-Meta's goal is to create strong alliances, support implementing organizations and create community connections. However, other actors did not describe the creation of strong alliances as part of Co-Meta's key goals. This could suggest an unfamiliarity with the collective impact (CI) approach.

ACTING IN SILOS

Some actors (especially instructors) were unaware of Co-Meta's operations beyond the scope of their particular community course. Despite this, instructors maintained the same shared objective of economic and social empowerment as other actors in the network.

While the vast majority of participants agree about Co-Meta's overall goal being economic and social empowerment, there is some ambiguity about whether Co-Meta is pursuing

the goal of systemic change. It would be beneficial for the network to establish a co-creation exercise where actors collectively revisit their shared goals and priorities for the initiative.

Mutually Reinforcing Activities

All interviewees agreed that creating alliances, improving one another's capacities and jointly improving methodologies and diagnosis of community issues lead to the success of the women's empowerment agenda. This common understanding has helped actors to work on solutions together rather than attempting to solve issues on their own.

There are monthly meetings in which organizations ranging from the government of Zappopan, to CEMEX (enterprise) and ProMexico (NGO) are present. In their meetings, these different actors discuss how they can mutually support one another. These meetings introduced the Hewlett-Packard Foundation (HP) to key actors — UN Women, the government of Jalisco and ProSociedad — which led to UN Women signing an agreement with the Jalisco government regarding second-chance education programs. UN Women fostered this relationship with the Jalisco government and helps it implement the Second Chance initiative's goals. Essentially, UN Women aided ProSociedad by linking their approach to public policy. The state government has also received mentoring from ProSociedad which currently helps the government with conceptualizing and evaluating problems, and has received funding in exchange. Other collaborations promote UN Women's initiative within the state of Jalisco. The Jalisco government links UN Women with Co-Meta so that participants can have both economic support from the state as well as mentoring and skills building from Co-Meta.

Participants mentioned that ProSociedad has invited women from Enconcreto (a women's concrete goods company) to work with Indigenous artists so that they can collaborate and sell their designs. These activities reached

marginalized groups that are not reached by ProSociedad or Co-Meta. A dynamic group of organizations also partners with ProSociedad to provide training to one another. For example, an organization provides a team that trains participants on how to naturally dehydrate food, thereby adding market value to food that may otherwise go to waste. ProSociedad delivered gender-sensitivity training for this organization's team so they could better interact with participants.

Doing Better

Organizations tend to focus on their own efforts rather than on how they can collaborate in mutually reinforcing ways. ProSociedad might consider creating a shared document and/or forum in which actors would clearly state their objectives, measurements/targets and initiatives. This document would be centrally gathered to allow ProSociedad to track what organizations lack in resources so that they can provide them with assistance. Reaching consensus on objectives is a critical step that allows the diverse coalition of members to develop mutually reinforcing activities. Defining the objectives, measures and targets establishes a solid foundation on which to prioritize initiatives. This is helpful for sensibly and effectively allocating funding and other resources.

Backbone Function

PROSOCIEDAD AS A BACKBONE ORGANIZATION

The majority of participants believe that ProSociedad plays several functions as the backbone organization. It measures the program's effectiveness through ongoing measurement, monitoring and evaluation, and develops alliances with organizations such as UN Women. Measurement efforts include: program enrolment and retention rates and retention of organizations in the network. ProSociedad effectively applied their knowledge and experience of establishing the Co-Meta

Initiative to the realities in Jalisco. They also have extensive experience in linking actors to promote women's economic empowerment through a CI approach.

Several participants explained how ProSociedad has utilized evidence-based decision making for the implementation of their programs, especially the Co-Meta Initiative. For instance, ProSociedad conducted focus groups to pilot the graduation approach. It also involved social workers as proxies for their target groups while also recognizing that social workers have experience and intimate knowledge about the community. Social workers were key actors when modelling what was important for Co-Meta.

ProSociedad is the organization they go to for knowledge and resources, thereby giving the impression of a vertical hierarchy. However, ProSociedad does not want this image tied to their organizations and tried repeatedly to create a horizontal approach in which it was an equal partner with other organizations. ProSociedad shares the knowledge that they have with other organizations but they do not micromanage how each organization conducts their program's implementation or day-to-day activities. For instance, actors have the autonomy to run training sessions as they see fit and ProSociedad is simply there to provide any assistance.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE BACKBONE ORGANIZATION (PROSOCIEDAD) AND LOCAL ACTORS/INDIVIDUALS

Perspectives varied on the challenges with ProSociedad's partnership approach. One interviewee suggested ProSociedad had lost connection with an important local actor that conducted mentoring sessions. After the sessions were conducted, ProSociedad never followed up with that organization again. Such decisions to not maintain communication with a local actor may affect the strength of alliances. Even though the organization's representative was in contact with an individual from ProSociedad, they were unsure about how it was involved in the

network of actors. A few interviewees mentioned that mentors and teachers were uncertain of their role. Despite these concerns, we were consistently informed that ProSociedad has been an overall positive and supportive organization in promoting women's economic empowerment.

Doing Better

Based on our evaluation, it would be beneficial for ProSociedad to disseminate information regarding the CI approach so that it is not seen as the only source of knowledge and leadership in the network. It might consider conducting information sessions at the beginning of the program that outlines what the CI approach is designed to accomplish and how it desires to achieve its goals and ensure regular follow-ups. Currently, there are also local organizations that are unaware of what other actors are doing. A key consideration would be knowledge sharing and exchange between ProSociedad and local actors regarding what allies are doing. This fosters an ecosystem that allows organizations to connect, share information and collaborate with one another.

Open Communication

Most interviewees identified regular communication with ProSociedad. Some instructors and mentors stated that they were in contact with only ProSociedad. A constant flow of communication through WhatsApp and phone calls has become much more common during the COVID-19 pandemic. In-person meetings between ProSociedad and the staff at community centres occur approximately every 15 days. In theory, ProSociedad meets with all implementing partners (CEMEX, Zapopan, ProMexico) together every month to discuss best practices. ProSociedad is also the "middle person" for communication between funding bodies, including UN Women, Hewlett-Packard and the Zapopan government.

COMMUNICATION BETWEEN IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS

Implementing partners identified that communication between one another is lacking. For example, members of community centres do not feel that they are equipped to replicate successes at other centres for lack of communication. Although each centre has their own strengths — CEMEX has connections to industry, ProMexico has an effective mentorship process and Zapopan has multiple locations with government support, there is no communication mechanism for sharing these strengths among partners. The “monthly meeting” between implementing partners has in reality happened only once and there is no systematic process to communicate, evaluate and disseminate best practices between centres.

COMMUNICATION WITH PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

During the pandemic, mentors have used WhatsApp to stay connected to participants. Communication has been a challenge because many participants do not have reliable access to technology. Prior to the pandemic, mentors and instructors had consistent meetings with participants. Some mentors and instructors stated that the relationship was intimate — participants felt comfortable sharing struggles in their personal lives.

Doing Better

Meetings between implementing partners should be more regular (monthly), so that they are able to share experiences and best practices with one another. In ProSociedad’s monitoring-and-evaluation framework, there should be a systematic way to report on the successes of community centres so these best practices can be replicated elsewhere. Communication between mentors and instructors should also be fostered so that best practices can be shared between community centres. A biannual meeting between program facilitators at all centres would also be beneficial.

Shared Measurement

SHARED MEASUREMENT BY PROSOCIEDAD

There was an overwhelming consensus among interviewees regarding the importance of monitoring and evaluation of the Co-Meta Initiative. Network actors also believe that evidence supported by data allows local organizations and ProSociedad to understand the program’s effectiveness and where to make adjustments. ProSociedad has infrastructure and resources in place in which human capital (knowledge, social commitment among employees), as well as social capital (allies and contacts involved) exist to conduct effective monitoring and evaluation. ProSociedad has developed their monitoring-and-evaluation structure to a level that exceeds the government’s. Stakeholders explained that ProSociedad cares about the immediate results, and that through their monitoring-and-evaluation structure, they are able to take both the medium- and long-term views of the project into equal consideration.

SHARED MEASUREMENT BY LOCAL ACTORS

Beyond ProSociedad, the network of actors provides statistics to track the progress of the women involved in the program. For example, ProMexico has a formal and systematic monitoring-and-evaluation structure to track statistics on the number of women enrolled in the program and drop-out rates. Some centres conducted informal baseline assessments of participants’ socioeconomic backgrounds. These assessments “opened the eyes” of employees — although they don’t usually collect such data they thought it was very interesting. There are also varying capacities and time committed to conducting monitoring and evaluation. Some organizations employ experts who conduct surveys and general reporting on statistics about the programs. There are also organizations that have the capacity and individuals to conduct robust monitoring and evaluation but do not because they simply do not have the time.

Even though it is common knowledge that monitoring and evaluation are important, interviewees reported dealing with more immediate concerns. Their focus is directed to ensuring that women have access to food and supporting their general well-being. We also discovered that there is a lack of uniformity in the network of actors regarding the approach to monitoring and evaluation. Some actors have developed their own monitoring-and-evaluation structure while others have not.

The participants realize that these limitations can perpetuate a situation in which it is difficult for actors to know how effective the initiative is. Some suggested that monitoring and evaluation should be conducted by an external third party who could have a fresh view of the program and therefore the time and effort to conduct the monitoring and evaluation would no longer be an issue. Despite the many limitations identified, there is consensus among our interviewees that monitoring and evaluation are essential. These different actors realize that they need more effort to gather data because it is the most reliable way to know whether the network of organizations is collectively succeeding or not.

Doing Better

The creation of an incentive structure for monitoring and evaluation increases all organizations' desire to contribute to and conduct monitoring and evaluation and participate in a shared measurement strategy. Organizations can begin with a few common metrics that make it easy to record and share data consistently throughout the network of actors. For instance, they might consider the number of participants in the classes, the number of workshops they attended and the number of women who require psychological counselling.

Training

LACK OF CONSISTENCY

Partners and mentors working in Co-Meta had varied access to training. While some

individuals had training, others had none and wanted training and some had no training and did not want any. ProMexico receives extensive training, and CEMEX instructors receive some, while Prosociedad offers different training to facilitators. This discrepancy highlights the lack of consistency in program implementation.

- *Trained.* Of the mentors who were trained, the training process differed depending on what partner organization the mentor was a direct part of. Overall, mentors and facilitators found training on violence prevention very useful, as well as training on maintaining interpersonal commitments. Learning that focused on gender issues was important to interviewees. After training, mentors feel able to connect women with appropriate resources, and facilitators have a good base of tools to respond to the women's needs.
- *Untrained.* Respondents opposed to training felt that it is not relevant because the parties involved build solutions together. Because Co-Meta is a partnership between teachers, participants, mentors and organizations, interviewees felt that its collaborative nature filled the gap between all parties involved. Others said that the lack of training gives them an opportunity to facilitate courses according to their own approaches. All interview participants highlighted the importance and ease of access to Prosociedad, ProMexico and other partners.

Doing Better

Organizations might consider creating a baseline training schema that addresses the expectations of knowledge mentors, teachers and interns to enable them to work effectively with the cohort of women. The schema should include:

- an overview of the graduation model,
- the importance of the network and community model,
- understanding how to integrate the gender perspective and

- unpacking unconscious bias around gender and social status.

They would also do well to create a human development training for a few days every six months or once a year. At this session, all facilitators could gather and share where they need more guidance, where the knowledge gaps are as well as strategies that are optimal and strategies that are not working optimally.

Organizational Trust

BASELINE OF TRUST

Many interviewees described how trust is the basis for success in organizational alliances. In fact, actors joined Co-Meta because ProSociedad and UN Women have a good community reputation. Many organizations chose to participate because they had worked with ProSociedad previously and developed a trusting relationship with them. Although interviewees described a hierarchy involved (funding bodies and ProSociedad were identified as leaders), they said this does not affect their work. Decision making occurs horizontally despite leadership dynamics. All participants agree that having a network structure has been effective since they are able to pool resources and expertise, and this in turn increases overall collective capacity.

In one instance, a workshop session had ended with Co-Meta but the ex-partner was not informed why the partnership had come to an end. A few interviewees stated that ProSociedad positions itself as a “capacity builder,” which is inherently top down/hierarchical. Its members are seen as the de facto leaders and their decisions are not questioned. There is an interesting dynamic where the theoretical knowledge that ProSociedad holds about program functions (for example, monitoring-and-evaluation mechanisms) is seen as more important than the practical knowledge of actors on the ground. ProSociedad recognizes this and is attempting to reframe its operations to ensure that they are implemented horizontally.

Doing Better

Networks actors could benefit by hosting frequent debriefing meetings to ensure that all voices are heard and ProSociedad is not the sole knowledge holder. They should also ensure that there is a structured off-boarding session for former partners to evaluate their experience in the network.

Capacity Building

Interview participants expressed a belief in Co-Meta’s capacity to grow but anticipate a slow build. They regard Co-Meta as highly adaptable to the conditions, challenges and new contexts in which it operates. They found the network approach to be extremely helpful and necessary for expanding the participants’ capacity and expanding the program. Overall, since the network is cohesive and functions harmoniously, participants described Co-Meta as easy to implement. Facilitators have not encountered any major complications that would hinder the project. They have been well received by the community. Many of the actors we interviewed knew the program aims to grow. Many were also aware of the larger goals and structure that UN Women hopes to achieve.

COVID-19

All parties described changes in the program’s facilitation as a result of the pandemic. In this period, the changes in the economy have affected the women personally as well as the program’s ability to reach them. Those interviewed cited health issues, economic stress, psychosocial stress and increased familial burdens as barriers to capacity building.

They also described the opportunities and challenges with online education and communication. Given the demographics of the women participants, online communication is difficult. The women on average are between 40 and 50 years old and not all of them have adequate electricity or Internet access. Transitioning to WhatsApp or Zoom has been

very difficult. Our interviewees realize that, given the pandemic, Co-Meta does not have the capacity to build communication networks.

CAPACITY BUILDING WITH PROSOCIEDAD

According to our interviews, ProSociedad is working effectively at expanding the network of actors. There is consensus that ProSociedad is systematizing how new actors are incorporated. Co-Meta reaches out to organizations that share a common interest in women's economic empowerment. ProSociedad can align Co-Meta facilitators with the necessary resources to help women. This builds the trust between the women and Co-Meta and opens Co-Meta to more actors in the community.

CAPACITY BUILDING WITH IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS

Each actor approaches the tasks differently, with different agendas and goals. Interviewees found there was some resistance to change within organizations. Actors have different methods of training, instruction, data recording etc. These different approaches have the potential to impede Co-Meta's ability to scale operations. The main deterrent is the immediacy and frequency of daily emergencies that have to be addressed. Because there are so many short-term problems, there is less time allocated for addressing long-term goals, given Co-Meta's current working capacity.

CHANGING AND ADAPTING THE PROGRAM

Some of those we interviewed raised concerns that women were not given enough time to settle into classes. Others found the program too long and rigid. Their concerns relate to the efficiency of getting information to the women and with scaling up through program expansion to more areas in Jalisco. They also pertain to quality assurance as more participants are introduced to Co-Meta. We heard that the program works well and delivers high-quality services to participants because it has an intimate setting. Throughout the network, interviewees voiced appreciation for the holistic approach. Some also cited the emotional strain and cost on mentors and teachers, and the implications of quick program expansion that all need addressing.

FUNDING

Financing is the greatest barrier to serve the hardest-to-reach women. Those interviewed found the lack of sustainable financing to be a barrier to the success of the individual businesses the women create and the Co-Meta program overall. Interviewees highlighted that to increase capacity (personnel, resources, services), more funding would need to be secured for the Co-Meta Initiative.

Doing Better

Co-Meta actors should consider coordinating streamlined staff training and program facilitation between all partner organizations. Partner organizations should have the tools available to "speak the same language." To better understand program impacts, it would also be advantageous to track what women are doing before, during and after the program ends. For instance, how many women are in the same economic situation as when they started the program? Co-Meta should also undertake post-graduation evaluations with graduated women. They should consider gathering information such as how many women are running small businesses. Co-Meta should grow but be cognizant of participant-to-provider ratios. They should maintain small, intimate class sizes and limit the number of participants per mentor. This will maintain the program's quality and intimacy while limiting the emotional and psychological burdens facilitators are asked to take on.

Equity and Community

COMMUNITY CONSULTATIONS

Interviewees stated that in creating the Co-Meta Initiative, some community focus groups and consultations with social workers from the local foodbank helped to gauge needs. However, there were no direct consultations with program participants. Some mentioned that the lack of consultations with women to guide program design stems from ProSociedad's primary focus on theory instead of practice.

COMMUNITY NORMS

The majority of interviewees mentioned community norms as barriers for women — specifically, machismo culture. Women have had to quit the program because of family pressure, or have needed their husbands' approval to attend. There have also been circumstances of domestic violence that women have discussed with mentors and instructors. If Co-Meta expands, many feel that it should focus on a community education program to help men and children learn how to challenge machismo culture while recognizing that multiple interventions are needed to change norms.

SOCIAL FABRIC

Most interviewees identified that the Co-Meta Initiative has created trust and a bond between participants. Participants engage in teamwork rather than competition, despite working on similar business ventures.

PROGRAM OWNERSHIP

Instructors and mentors stated that women's ideas for the program are taken into account. For example, women participating in CEMEX wanted to collaborate to sell goods as a team, and the instructor changed the course outcomes to allow for this teamwork. However, there were instances when women may have been pigeonholed into learning about certain well-established industries in the geographical area of the community centre.

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Co-Meta's design involves extensive emotional support. The first level of support at all community centres is through instructors and mentors. Many of the mentors at the Pro-Mexico centre are psychologists. The next level of support is through the community centres or ProSociedad, which have connections to additional resources through psychological services and government programs.

A few interviewees outlined the need for sustained psychological follow-up, since the women face a lot of challenges and mental

health is not usually addressed in this specific program context.

A few mentors felt concerned that the program may be giving women false hope about their businesses' prospects. This could be unethical if women make life decisions accordingly and are led into more dangerous situations as a result. In one instance, a program participant felt lied to — she believed that the Co-Meta initiative would make her rich after six months.

CO-META'S REACH

Interviewees said that while there are gaps in Co-Meta's reach because the program does not have the capacity to reach all marginalized groups, they need to also contend with the challenge that a wider reach may mean a loss in program quality. Generally, program participants are those who have their basic needs met. They are literate with some education and live near community centres — they are not the "hardest to reach."

Examples of groups that are not being reached include:

- migrants from Latin America
- returning migrants from the US
- Indigenous women
- extremely poor women
- geographically isolated women (certain municipalities around Jalisco aren't being reached)
- women who face severe domestic violence
- illiterate women
- women with disabilities
- rural women.

Doing Better

In expanding courses for instruction, the Co-Meta partners should ensure that women are engaged so that the enterprises chosen align with their interests. In explaining and promoting the program to community members, it is important that representatives of the Co-Meta Initiative are realistic and transparent so that women do not have false expectations of becoming "rich" through their participation.

The Co-Meta Initiative should have a system to determine which women require additional psychological follow-up. If extra funding can be secured, there should be business grants available for women to help them escape from dangerous situations at home. If Co-Meta expands, it should consider the direction of community education programs to educate men and children about women's empowerment as well.

Systems Lens

CULTURAL CONTEXT

The region lacks education that addresses gender issues. In some cases, men and women perceive empowered, self-sufficient women as counter to current societal norms. This gendered stereotype colours how girls are educated. Some interview participants noted policies that have tried to integrate girls into the sciences from a young age and developed activities specifically catered to them.

DISCRIMINATION

Co-Meta participants face discrimination in maintaining their businesses. The women are fighting social and cultural barriers in the market that limits the stability of their business. Most of the study participants said the women need help getting jobs and opportunities after the program ends. For example, they need support with branding, marketing strategies and creating client networks.

There was consensus that starting a new business in Mexico is not easy, especially for women. The Co-Meta partners understand that promoting small businesses is a very aspirational and ambitious goal. Recognizing the structural issues in Mexico working against them means that expanding the program is a challenge. Not all the interviewees felt the challenge can be met by Co-Meta alone.

GOVERNMENT AND POLICY

Those interviewed said Co-Meta is primed but not yet ready to consider influencing policy. Co-Meta partners know the relationship between

Co-Meta, the government and UN Women are the most salient ways to begin to work toward systemic change. Interviewees noted how Co-Meta has taught the government to work collaboratively. They agreed that Co-Meta has highlighted the importance of gender by looking at gender-based violence and holistic approaches to responding to issues of violence. To establish this link, the program needs more visibility.

Doing Better

To combat the constraints of managing and marketing small businesses in Mexico, it would be advantageous to market Co-Meta products as a group on a unified platform. In this way, the reach of each small business would be greater. To combat male discrimination, stakeholders might consider allowing the men in the participants' lives to audit classes. Educating family units on why and how the women are being supported would begin the process of changing individual beliefs about women's agency and aptitude. It would also allow the women to directly share their progress and achievements with their family.

Conclusion and Recommendations

We collected important qualitative information in our interviews, including data that were beyond the scope of our research, specifically relating to the social barriers that limit women's participation. These barriers include: technology access, family resistance, machismo culture, housework (child/elderly care), finances, literacy/education and transportation. Further research could assess how these barriers to accessing Co-Meta's services may be approached and remedied.

We did not interview the participants in the Co-Meta Initiative because it was beyond the scope of our study. Thus, all of the information we have regarding program participants comes from

Co-Meta's program facilitators (i.e., secondary accounts). For this reason we chose to base our assessment not on program participants but on Co-Meta's organizational structure and the collective impact of actors. If future studies analyze the barriers to accessing Co-Meta's services, we recommend a participatory approach that includes the input of program participants.

Limitations

To gain an understanding of the alliance ecosystem in Jalisco, we wanted to conduct several interviews with former program partners to ascertain why they were no longer in partnership with ProSociedad. However, we were unable to interview many former partners. One of the former partners we interviewed was still in a loose collaboration with ProSociedad, which limited our ability to view and research ProSociedad and Co-Meta from this unique perspective. The interviewees we spoke to held critical knowledge of ProSociedad's functions and if there were more opportunities to speak with former partners, our research would have been enhanced from this perspective.

Our research project was also limited by the amount of time allotted to complete it. This constraint was determined by each researcher's individual educational program. The months between May and August were the original allotted time to complete this project. This restricted our window to conduct virtual interviews and analyze data, working with the joint availability of researchers, translators and interview participants. Therefore, we were not able to interview all potential participants and may have missed key insights. Our time was further constrained by COVID-19 restrictions.

The global pandemic prevented our research team from travelling to Mexico to conduct face-to-face interviews. This limitation meant we were unable to conduct additional interviews to gain further in-depth knowledge on the functioning of

the alliance ecosystem as it pertains to women's economic empowerment. Our desk research and interview questions were also limited to the operating conditions prior to COVID-19. Essentially, this limitation produced knowledge that may not reflect current realities on the ground.

People involved in the Co-Meta Initiative feel passionate about their shared goal of supporting women's economic empowerment and organizational trust is very strong among the network of actors. However, because Co-Meta is still in its infancy, many of its processes have yet to be systematized, which has led to limitations in the initiative's delivery.

We suggest the following changes to Co-Meta's organizational structure and community outreach to address some of the concerns that interviewees brought forth.

Organizational Structure

COMMUNICATION

Actors (mentors, instructors, facilitators and funders) within the network should have a deeper understanding of what the collective impact (CI) approach entails so that they can see how their activities fit within this larger CI framework. All actors should also be involved in the co-creation of a guidebook outlining the network's shared goals and agenda. Implementing partners need regular meetings with each other to ensure that best practices from each community centre are shared. Frequent debriefs with ProSociedad would allow for partners to voice their opinions so ProSociedad is not the sole knowledge holder.

BASELINE TRAINING

Co-Meta actors should collaborate on streamlined staff training and program facilitation between all partner organizations. An introductory training schema would address the expected knowledge that mentors, teachers and interns would need to work effectively with the cohort of women. Specifically, training should:

- include an overview of the graduation model,
- recognize the importance of the network and community model,
- acknowledge gendered perspectives and
- tackle issues of unconscious bias around gender and social status.

A training session for a few days every six months or year would update facilitators on program changes and provide an opportunity to receive feedback on the usefulness and limitations of tools and what other tools and resources are needed to successfully achieve Co-Meta's goals. The program should be implemented in a similar but flexible fashion throughout the network.

OFF-BOARDING

ProSociedad should create an off-boarding survey for former partners to ensure their perspectives on the program are accounted for. This is especially important because these partners may be more willing to express concerns about the organizational structure and how to redress them. These survey results should be taken into account when updating the program.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Create a centralized monitoring-and-evaluation system, including metrics to help gather and disseminate priority data among the Co-Meta initiative partners. This system should include baseline questions that are participant and program focused. First, regarding participants, questions could include:

- What are women doing before, during and after the program?
- How many women are running small businesses?
- How many women are in the same situation after the program as when they arrived in the program?
- How many women need psychological follow-up?

- What (if any) changes have they seen in their home lives as a result of the program?

Such data will give the program insights into the sustainability of the skills imparted to the women and the collective sustainability of their ventures.

Second, regarding the program itself, questions could include:

- To what extent is your organization lacking financial resources?
- What role does ProSociedad play in this network of actors?
- Can you explain your understanding of the collective impact approach?

These metrics are designed to not require a considerable amount of time to complete and will not require expertise from monitoring-and-evaluation experts. Within ProSociedad's monitoring-and-evaluation framework, there should be a comprehensive and systematic way to define and report on the successes of community centres. This way, these practices can be replicated seamlessly elsewhere. These practices should allow for closer communication between implementing partners.

Reframing the Program

ProSociedad should work to reframe the program in three ways:

- Reframe the concept of empowerment so that the end goal is not obtaining an income but the larger learning process and ability to exercise individual agency that comes with it.
- Provide community members with a realistic overview so that women do not enter the program with false expectations.
- Continue to reframe the language of "capacity building" to allow for a more participatory approach.

Research Team

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Claude Galette is a Master of Global Affairs student at the Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy with a specialization in environmental studies. Her primary interests are infrastructure and waste management systems in the global south, sustainable consumer materials, environmental economics and integrating indigenous knowledge into sustainability research. In autumn of 2020 she began working with the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies in Kanagawa, Japan, working in the Sustainable Consumption and Production division. Claude graduated from the University of Rochester in 2016 with a bachelor of arts in psychology and a focus on brain and cognitive science. She conducted research with the Rochester Center for Brain Imaging and completed a year-long research project with the University of Cape Town as a Gilman Scholar. She has lived and worked in Canada, the US, Haiti, Denmark, Mexico and South Africa.



Omar Ali is a second-year Master of Public Policy student at the Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy. He holds a bachelor of arts degree in political science from the University of Toronto Mississauga. He has worked extensively on human rights issues ranging from victims of wrongful imprisonment in Egypt to opening up an Amnesty International chapter as an undergraduate student. Omar has worked on economic issues facing immigrants in Canada by helping design a codebook for creating competency assessment tools to help immigrants translate their skills to a Canadian context. Currently, he is the Mentor Program Manager for the Global Ideas Institute. Omar has a healthy obsession with basketball and soccer, and is probably the biggest Cristiano Ronaldo fan you'll ever meet.



Erica Di Ruggiero is the Director, Centre for Global Health, Director of the Collaborative Specialization in Global Health, and Associate Professor of Global Health, Social and Behavioural Health Sciences Division, and the Institute of Health Policy Management and Evaluation at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health. Di Ruggiero is a global public health expert and opinion leader whose research focuses on evaluating the health and health equity impacts of different policy and program interventions on marginalized groups (e.g., labour policies and interventions that aim to reduce food insecurity). She is also interested in how different types of evidence shape global policy agendas and influence global governance in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals. She is editor in chief for *Global Health Promotion*. Prior to joining the university, she was the inaugural Deputy Scientific Director with the Canadian Institutes of Health Research — Institute of Population and Public Health where she led the development, implementation and evaluation of strategic research, capacity building and knowledge translation initiatives to address different research priorities including health equity, global health, maternal and child health, environmental health and population health intervention research. Di Ruggiero obtained her BSc in nutritional sciences, a master's of health science in community nutrition and a PhD in public health sciences from the University of Toronto. She is a registered dietitian.



The Reach Alliance began in 2015 at the University of Toronto as the Reach Project, a student-led, faculty-mentored multidisciplinary research initiative. Reach's unique approach uncovers how and why certain programs are successful in getting to some of the world's hardest-to-reach populations. Research teams, comprised of top students and faculty from across disciplines, spend up to twelve months investigating each case study. Once the data collection process is complete, teams write case reports that are published and disseminated across the Reach Alliance's diverse network of policymakers, practitioners, academics and business leaders.

Inspired by the United Nations' call to eliminate global poverty by 2030 as part of a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), our mission is to pursue the full achievement of the SDGs by equipping and empowering the next generation of global leaders to create knowledge and inspire action on reaching the hardest to reach.

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