



GRANT PROJECT LESSONS AND OUTCOMES

International Rescue Committee (IRC) CuéntaNos

CuentaNos.org¹ is an International Rescue Committee (IRC) interactive digital platform, operating in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, which places lifesaving and life-sustaining information in the hands of those affected by violence.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION:

The platform, which consists of a two-way messaging helpline and an online directory of local NGOs and governmental institutions, empowers its users to seek support services based on their personal needs or location. The interactive map/directory offers information about local services like protection, shelter, health, education, and legal assistance, while the two-way chat helpline serves as a case management and referral tool for local organizations. The service also offers direct and confidential psychosocial support to people in moments of crisis.

CuéntaNos received a GSMA grant to strengthen and expand its existing digital platform in El Salvador and Honduras. They received an additional GSMA grant in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to expand in Guatemala, and provide information in more local languages. With both grants, the goal was to create a more robust map of service providers whom people at risk or in vulnerable situations can be signposted to for information and services, as well as to increase the volume of services available to people at risk. There was also a focus on differential services for women, girls, and LGBTI people, who make up 60% of CuentaNos.org users.

1. "Cuéntanos" in Spanish means "tell us"

The funding was spent on: researching users, through focus groups and follow-up surveys, aiming to improve CuentaNos.org's services; establishing free internet points in different geographical areas so that people-at-risk could access the platform; and setting up physical safe-spaces where people could go for support.

The COVID-19 pandemic meant that many of IRC's activities had to be adapted to comply with COVID-19 health and safety regulations, moving away from physical safe space support to digital safe spaces. The GSMA issued IRC a COVID adaptation grant to help support them and their partners through this process, allowing further expansion of CuentaNos. The pandemic also sparked a dramatic increase in the rates of gender-based violence (GBV) across the globe, as movement restrictions forced vulnerable girls and women to live with their perpetrators. The CuentaNos platform, and its local partner organizations, registered a large rise in demand for services.

“CuentaNos is an innovative answer to a complex problem in humanitarian response. At the IRC we are proud to have had the support of GSMA, to not only deepen the project’s impact in El Salvador, but expand it to Honduras and Guatemala reaching vulnerable communities with life-saving information, access to services, virtual psychosocial support and physical safe spaces.”

Katie Susman, Deputy Director of Programmes

KEY STATS

Over
100,000

CuentaNos users

ACROSS THE THREE COUNTRIES
HAVE BEEN SUPPLIED WITH TIMELY
SUPPORT AND INFORMATION



526% increase

IN USERS OF THE CUÉNTANOS TWO-WAY
MESSAGING HELPLINE AFTER THE ONSET
OF COVID 19



383 LOCAL SERVICE PROVIDERS

NOW PROVIDE THEIR ORGANIZATIONAL
INFORMATION ON THE CUÉNTANOS.ORG
PLATFORM



972 INDIVIDUALS
HAVE RECEIVED

REMOTE PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT

34

VIRTUAL EMOTIONAL SUPPORT
GROUPS WERE ESTABLISHED
ACROSS THE THREE COUNTRIES,
PROVIDING SUPPORT TO

93%

OF USERS WERE SATISFIED
WITH CUÉNTANOS.ORG
SERVICES

98%

WOULD RETURN TO THE
PHYSICAL SAFE SPACE IN EL
SALVADOR IN A TIME OF NEED

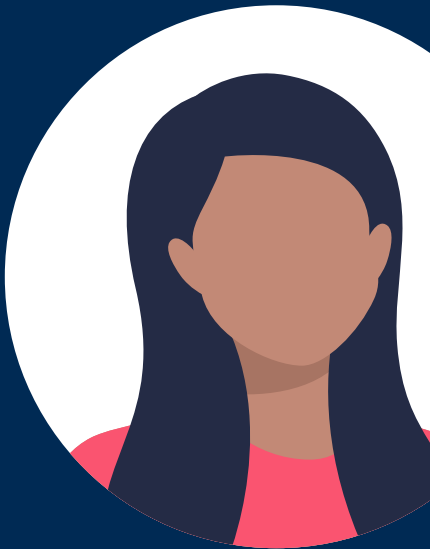
640 PEOPLE



CASE STUDY

Marta*

Marta is a young women from Honduras who accessed CuéntaNos in search of legal advice. Marta's friend Julia, a 25-year-old woman with mental health needs, is married to an abusive partner. During Covid-19, Julia fell pregnant and struggled to cope. Marta discovered she had abandoned her baby a number times. Marta wanted to find help for Julia, and a stable home for the new-born baby, but during Covid-19, local services were closed and she did not know what to do. While scrolling on Instagram, Marta discovered CuéntaNos. She visited the webpage and after browsing the services available near to her, she found out about the CuéntaNos WhatsApp service. Through the messaging service, Marta received guidance and was referred to different places where she could get support for Julia, including legal advice and psychological support services. Marta was able to help Julia leave the abusive situation and tackle her rejection towards her baby. Now, Marta feels confident about where to go if she needs help and highly recommends CuéntaNos for its confidentiality, accessibility and reliability.



CASE STUDY

Lorena*

Lorena and her husband, parents of two children, lost their jobs during COVID-19. Lorena had worked for the same employer for 15 years - she was not fired, but they stopped paying her. The family did not know what would happen. As a result, Lorena's 11-year-old daughter, Ana, developed regular panic attacks. Lorena found out about CuéntaNos through social media when searching for information about mental health disorders.

"For me it was very surprising how they were giving me help over the phone and that they gave me the consultation for my daughter, even during the pandemic. It is difficult to see your children suffering and this support has made me feel much calmer as a mother. CuéntaNos was the light in our darkness. I see a change in Ana; she is more confident. Seeing my children healthy is a great peace of mind. There are many of us who cannot afford to see a psychologist, because it means spending extra money, and sometimes there isn't any. Please continue to support these organizations, because the help you receive is real, it is honest."

Project Outcomes & Lessons



OUTCOME

CuéntaNos saw a 526% increase in users of its two-way online chat helpline during the pandemic, highlighting the need for safe and reliable information and psychological support, as well as the trust that users have in the technology and organization.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of new users seeking services through CuéntaNos' messaging service increased by 526%, going from 1,000 monthly users pre-pandemic to over 13,000 users in September 2020. This increase reflected not only the overall spike in demand for GBV services caused by the pandemic's movement restrictions, but also reflected user satisfaction with CuéntaNos services. Virtually all (93 per

cent) users reported they were satisfied with CuéntaNos in a user survey.

CuéntaNos' chat helpline moderators, trained in psychosocial support, have to-date provided direct, confidential virtual emotional support for over 100,000 vulnerable women, girls and LGBTQI community members via its two-way messaging platform, across the three countries.

**OUTCOME**

CuéntaNos has become IRC's flagship program in Northern Central America, with 453 local service providers, 2,155 points of service, evaluated, mapped and kept updated throughout the pandemic on the interactive platform.

By partnering with local organizations that are already providing lifesaving services, the CuéntaNos platform has been able to strengthen the role of local NGOs in humanitarian response. Partnerships with organisations working locally such as Glasswing International in Honduras who actively engage with community actors and

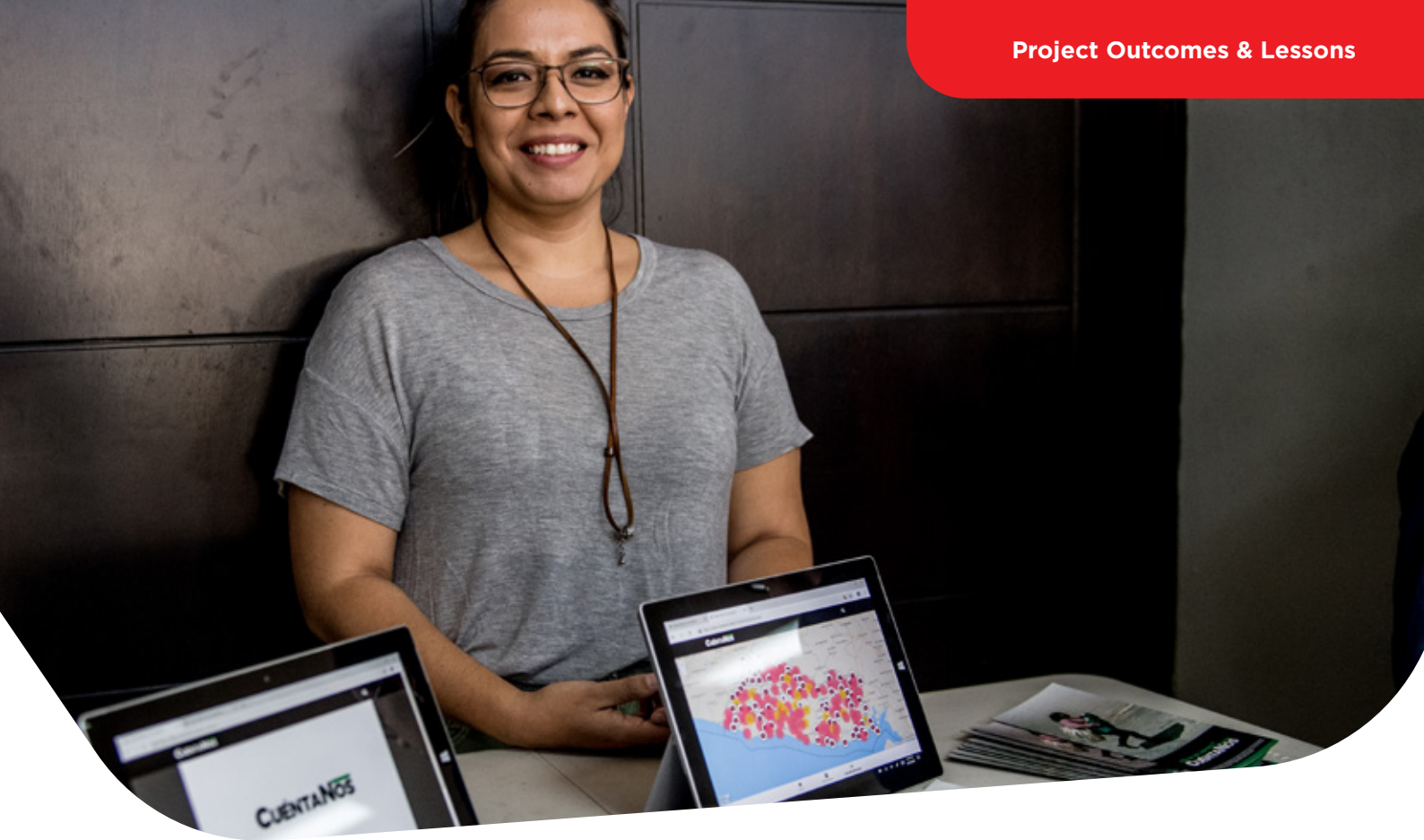
groups, enabled over 280 points of service in Honduras to be added to the CuéntaNos platform. By way of the digital directory of local GBV services, traditional local development actors have been transformed into a coordinated humanitarian response, creating effective referral pathways.

OUTCOME

640 people in need of psychological support were reached through an in person safe space and 34 virtual emotional support groups.

COVID-19 restrictions meant that just one physical safe space was opened in El Salvador, rather than the four planned across the three countries. Instead, IRC, alongside its local partners, set up a total of 34 virtual emotional support groups to offer vital support to those in need. The establishment of virtual support groups

during a time of worldwide uncertainty was an important new resource for local populations, who are constantly seeking services oriented to mental health. The virtual setting eliminated mobility barriers, whilst helping prevent the spread of COVID-19, meaning more users could receive support than before.



LESSON

Virtual training of local service providers was unexpectedly effective.

Virtual training sessions for local service providers, originally implemented in lieu of in-person training due to COVID-19, helped IRC to strengthen the capacity of local partners at a larger scale than expected. The online learning format meant that more people were able to attend training sessions, which were held simultaneously across the three countries. Cross-border discussion during the virtual training promoted a better understanding of the common GBV challenges across contexts, while attendee's different cultural backgrounds also enriched the discussion. Virtual training also allowed partner organizations to build a knowledge network, to share lessons learned and expertise in specific areas.

When switching to virtual training, CuéntaNos quickly found that it was essential to not only invest in virtual support materials, but also to be innovative and flexible regarding group activities and methodologies, to maintain participant attention. The most well-received virtual training content was dynamic, it included relevant readings, videos, or interactive tools, and creating an environment of shared experiences. Due to the success of the virtual training format, CuéntaNos plans to combine in-person and virtual training as a powerful force to engage more local partners in learning going forward.

The virtual training was, however, not entirely without its challenges, the biggest one being adequate access to technology such as stable internet connection or laptops. To overcome these limitations, the IRC team shared educational material with participants in advance, and in more accessible formats. At the end of the training, the IRC also shared a methodological guide and facilitator's manual with all participants, so they could replicate the training with more staff within their organization, or to expand into other local service providers.

LESSON

Mobile technology, including social media and popular messaging services, proved to be an effective channel to reach people trapped at home and in need of support during the pandemic.

Integrating Facebook Messenger and Whatsapp into CuéntaNos, as well as advertising their services on Facebook² and Instagram, proved very successful in helping to

reach vulnerable people, as it both expanded and diversified the types of people reached. Social media served as a connector, driving traffic to the CuentaNos.org platform, where users could seek support from local partners, who were encouraged to develop digital content, including live Q&A sessions, videos, and feature articles. Following the huge increase in demand for the direct messaging support helpline, it extended moderation hours to be able to continue offering immediate, confidential psychological support and connect users with local GBV services.

LESSON

The decolonisation of information was key in reaching indigenous at-risk populations.

Although Spanish is by far the most commonly spoken language in Northern Central America, CuéntaNos found that language barriers prevented some of the most vulnerable groups from accessing lifesaving services. Vulnerable populations within Mayan indigenous communities were at particular risk of not having their response needs met. As such, part of the GSMA grant was used to decolonise information, making it more inclusive, by translating resources

into three indigenous languages. These indigenous language articles were some of the most successful content published by CuentaNos.org. In the same vein, some of the resources were also transformed from written articles to audio and visual content, to make it more inclusive and accessible for illiterate populations and those with disabilities.

This would not have been possible without strong connections and working closely with local partners across the region. IRC see themselves as a connector to information and services that are already being used which builds trust with users and ensures services are suited to local contexts.

Future for CuentaNos.org

- ➔ CuentaNos.org will continue to expand their operations across the region by adding more service providers to the CuéntaNos platform
- ➔ CuentaNos.org hopes to expand the number of emotional support groups and individual sessions being offered.
- ➔ They will continue to train providers virtually, in conjunction with in-person training.
- ➔ Translating articles and information into an additional 20 Mayan languages.

2. CuéntaNos user research showed that Facebook was one of the primary sources of information for populations in Honduras and El Salvador.