

Strengthening women entrepreneurs in turbulent times: the updated partnership around Mujeres A.V.E. project

Almost two years after the launch of an entrepreneurship project for women in Oaxaca, Mexico, the partnership among the Trafigura Foundation, Cherie Blair Foundation for Women and SiKanda moves into its next phase of collaboration to help their beneficiaries better adapt and respond to the COVID-19 crisis.

In Villa de Zaachila, close to 17,000 people live, work and study next to the largest landfill in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico. Two thirds of Oaxaca's population live in poverty, and the community of Villa de Zaachila is particularly marginalised. 82% of the area's homes lack basic services like running water, sewage and electricity, and the landfill causes enormous environmental, social and economic impacts on the area and its community.

In early 2019, the Trafigura Foundation, the Cherie Blair Foundation for Women and Oaxaca-based Solidaridad Internacional Kanda A.C. (SiKanda) established a partnership to support the women entrepreneurs of Villa de Zaachila through the Mujeres A.V.E. project. Mujeres A.V.E. supports local women to better manage their micro-businesses, which has a fantastic impact on their families and the wider area as they develop enterprises to service their local community. The tailored support and training provided was designed to build participants' capability and confidence, as informed by an in-depth needs assessment conducted with the women of Villa de Zaachila in 2018.

"What I sell today is what I eat tomorrow" – Guadalupe, a firewood seller, popsicle shop owner and Mujeres A.V.E. participant

Supporting women entrepreneurs to become more financially independent and build more sustainable businesses not only lifts them out of poverty, but also leads to them investing in their families and communities.

Women entrepreneurs' voices at the heart of our project design and delivery

We are proud that the women entrepreneurs of Villa de Zaachila have been at the heart of Mujeres A.V.E. since its inception, and their voices and opinions have informed the design and delivery of the project. The name "Mujeres A.V.E.", which was chosen by the participants themselves, embodies this approach and encapsulates what they see as the true nature of entrepreneurship: "mujeres" means "women", and "ave" translates to "bird". A.V.E. also stands for "actuando, vinculando and emprendiendo": "acting, connecting, entrepreneurial".

We started Mujeres A.V.E. in January 2019, and towards the end of our first year of implementation, we were already seeking to strengthen the project, based on feedback we received from the women taking part. We made the project more interactive, expanded the training locations to make it easier for women to reach them, became more flexible on the coaching sessions' locations, and started facilitating study visits to other women's businesses outside of Villa de Zaachila to inspire and cross pollinate ideas. We also identified other areas that could be strengthened, such as supporting women to access new markets and improve their savings.

Pivoting to support women through the pandemic

In March 2020, we found ourselves in the middle of an unprecedented and unforeseen global pandemic that would significantly impact our plans for Mujeres A.V.E. In response to COVID-19's lockdown measures in Villa de Zaachila, we quickly pivoted and adapted the project so we could continue to support the women of Mujeres A.V.E. remotely while providing them with extra guidance, tools and resources to meet new needs. Our quick response helped them navigate the impact of the pandemic on their lives and businesses, and to remain resilient throughout.

One of the most critical adaptations we made to maintain our support remotely was providing the women with mobile phone credit so they could have unlimited Facebook and WhatsApp access. These communication channels, which many women previously used sparingly due to the prohibitive cost of data, enabled them to keep in touch with their trainers and other women in the project, as well as follow up with their families and receive updates from the health authorities.

We provided ongoing business skills training, coaching and other support relating to business resilience and personal well-being entirely remotely. We also trained women to use WhatsApp and Facebook to market their products online and sell to customers remotely. Additionally, participants tried to support each other's businesses by buying from each other where possible, exemplifying the spirit of "sisterpreneurs".

One year on from the start of the pandemic, we reflect on some of the positive achievements that we've had with Mujeres A.V.E. Many of the women entrepreneurs have increased their digital literacy and have started selling through online marketplaces. Additionally, the newly-created WhatsApp groups built even stronger relationships amongst participants, who relied greatly on their peers for emotional support throughout the most difficult periods of the pandemic. Some of the women entrepreneurs have also started savings groups and collectives with women they met through the project.

Looking Ahead

As the global pandemic continues, we are already seeing that women globally, including the entrepreneurs we support through Mujeres A.V.E., are being disproportionately impacted socially and economically. Research by World Bank, for example, found women in Latin America were 44% more likely than men to lose a job in the pandemic's first two months. Women are also more likely to work in informal jobs—as is the case with Mujeres A.V.E.'s participants—that lack protections such as paid sick leave or unemployment insurance, and have no social safety net to fall back on.

Through our partnership, we want to ensure that we can provide women entrepreneurs in Villa de Zaachila with the skills, confidence and networks they need to be as resilient as possible both during this challenging time and when looking to the future. With this in mind, we are moving to a new phase of our partnership structure so that the SiKanda team, who are in daily contact with the women of Mujeres A.V.E., could have the flexibility to respond quickly to their changing needs. To enable SiKanda to do this, they will now assume responsibility for all management of the project, which will provide them with more in-depth oversight to better inform delivery during these turbulent times.

Over the past two years of our partnership, the Cherie Blair Foundation for Women has supported SiKanda to develop their capacity to deliver business skills training programmes

tailored for women entrepreneurs. This experience, combined with 's strong track record of working in Villa de Zaachila and deep knowledge of the local context, has informed the changes to our partnership structure. The Cherie Blair Foundation for Women now transitions to an advisory position, continuing to support SiKanda in honing its women's entrepreneurship expertise and offering technical expertise in monitoring, evaluation and learning. The Trafigura Foundation continues to provide funding as well as non-monetary support such as strategic planning, performance measurement or networking. Our updated partnership structure means we can continue to offer support that is most relevant for women entrepreneurs in Villa de Zaachila and the Mujeres A.V.E project is able to respond to their needs as best as possible.

As Mujeres A.V.E. is now in its final year of implementation, we are confident these changes will enable us to support women entrepreneurs' resilience throughout this difficult period. We look forward to the future, and to all of the incredible achievements the women of Mujeres A.V.E. are sure to create for themselves, their families and their community.