



MESOAMERICAN WORKSHOP ON SOLIDARITY AND GLOBAL HEALTH



Summary of the Mesoamerican Workshop: Costa Rica 27–28 February 2025

Background

The aim of the *Global Health Solidarity* project is to enrich current understandings of the concept of ‘solidarity’, in order to develop tools that will help support increased practice of solidarity in global health in the future. The Mesoamerican Workshop, which involved participants from Mexico, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Brazil, Argentina, and beyond, was the fourth in a series of five regional workshops that have been held, in different languages and different parts of the world, to surface different meanings of solidarity and its practice. This summary highlights key themes from the workshop, with a more detailed [workshop report](#) available on the project website.

How understandings of solidarity are shaped by context

Workshop participants emphasised how solidarity, as a concept and practice, takes on different and sometimes even contradictory meanings according to the way communities and countries have evolved during their long histories.

For some, solidarity is a **fundamental ethical and political principle** – for example in guiding the development of Costa Rica’s public healthcare system since the establishment of the Second Republic in 1948. **This principle is now under strain** in light of the impact of neoliberal policies that have reshaped the original social pact in Costa Rica – as illustrated, for example, by inadequacies in basic infrastructure such as safe housing and clean water systems for Indigenous communities.



Solidarity may also be a **potential force for repair**, for example through social projects that provide basic healthcare for impoverished rural communities in order to fill gaps in the public healthcare system. However, such projects are hard to sustain and cannot be a substitute for repairing the gaps in the system that make these kinds of projects necessary.



For others, solidarity was argued to be an **empty signifier** – an unnecessary concept when individuals are already intertwined by relations of mutuality, interdependence and the deeply-held conviction that they have a duty to work together towards a common goal.



Solidarity can take **transnational form**, linking struggles across borders in pursuit of justice – for example in the way human rights and feminist activists have organised in the struggle for the legalisation of abortion, **creating solidaristic links with other social movements in different countries.**



Solidarity versus assistance: emancipation or dependency?

Participants explored distinctions between solidarity, charity and welfare assistance, reflecting on the debate relating to the concepts of emancipation and dependency that has emerged in the Latin American context during the last four decades.



Solidarity needs to be **grounded in a shared experience and sense of reciprocity and inter-dependence**, in order to be differentiated from mere philanthropic gestures. Depending on one another, rather than on state funding, can be empowering for grassroots organisations such as MUSADE (United Women in Health and Development) which works on gender equality and social justice. Without a strong sense of belonging and solidarity, MUSADE could not have stayed open: women in need of support have come together and have grown stronger, as individuals and as a community.



Solidarity is also **distinct from charity**: charity should be understood not as a value in itself but as the result of power imbalances and structural injustice.



There was a general consensus that **“asistencialismo”** – a form of ‘welfare dependency’ – **does not lead to genuine emancipation**. While solidarity might play a role in achieving emancipation from structures of oppression and marginalisation, it is even more important to aim to **dismantle long-standing structural injustices**.



The relationships between solidarity and human rights are complex: if we accept that people have a human right to be cared for, then fulfilling the obligations derived from this right cannot be considered as solidarity. But **solidarity and human rights may be able to co-exist** – for example in the way solidarity may be embedded in an organisation’s work ethic, in their idea of a just society and in their interactions with the people they serve.

Solidarity in global health

Drawing on their experience in a wide range of global health issues and projects, participants discussed how **solidarity can illuminate the tensions and even contradictions between the mandates of global health institutions and their organisational culture and bureaucratic processes**. It was argued that:

The **embedded and lived experience of solidarity is different** from what is meant by solidarity in institutional global health narratives, whether national or international. The lived experience of solidarity is unlikely to emerge in the absence of a **strong sense of belonging and reciprocity**.

Inequalities and power disparities between the global north and the global south, and within these regions themselves, represent one of the most pressing challenges to realising solidarity in practice in global health – for example through the expectations and persistently colonialist mindsets of global north practitioners working in global south countries for short periods of time.

Migration represents one of the most pressing and complex challenges in global health – in light of the precarious situation now faced by most humanitarian agencies, this is an area that clearly demands **more international solidarity**.

The language of solidarity can be misused to **cover up harms or erase duties** – the provision of assistance in response to past harms should be regarded as a duty to repair that harm, and not as solidarity.

In contrast, the history of solidaristic **grassroots movements** such as the HIV-AIDS local and international activist movement are sources of inspiration, teaching important lessons about the fundamental force for change that comes from the people directly affected by a health issue.



Solidarity driving structural change

- ★ Solidarity is key in mobilising processes of social and political transformation, but needs to be **linked to robust demands for justice and structural change**.
- ★ Solidarity is generally not a priority in politics – but is a **fundamental factor in political organising for justice and social transformation**. There is a **need to articulate stronger alliances** between social movements, NGOs, political representatives and experts, to have a chance to influence decision making processes and shape public policy. These alliances need to be **nurtured through solidarity and reciprocity**, as well as by strategic thinking and clearly targeted plans of action.
- ★ In politics, reminders of our shared humanity – how we and ‘the other’ are part of something that is bigger than us – may risk seeming naïve. If we want to make solidarity something more robust and enduring, we need to **find ways to connect the moral demand to acknowledge our shared humanity with the lessons that political realism can offer**, recognising how easily humans can exclude others from that very acknowledgement.
- ★ In some cases, **extreme vulnerability can bring about solidarity**, fostering unexpected alliances for social and political change – as illustrated in the human rights case brought on behalf of Beatriz, a Salvadoran woman who died as a result of being refused a therapeutic abortion. Supported by the solidarity shown at regional and international level by feminist grassroots networks, academic institutions, and human rights organisations, Beatriz’ family took her case to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights which ultimately held that El Salvador had violated her human rights by denying her timely access to a therapeutic abortion.
- ★ However, it is crucial to keep in view **how difficult, or even impossible, it is to act in solidarity with what remains hidden behind taboos, fear and censorship**. In countries where abortion is a criminal offence, women have to make decisions about abortion in the knowledge that they could be sent to jail for several years. This awareness gives the concept of vulnerability a necessary concreteness and connection to reality.
- ★ Solidaristic action resisting discrimination can itself be a source of transformative pride: there is a **potency, joy and dignity of living in solidarity with each other**: helping, protecting and defending each other against poverty, exclusion, and persecution; and fighting for their right to be alive, exist and persevere without shame.

Concluding thoughts: the ‘last name’ of solidarity

In order to make solidarity truly applicable and, more importantly, in order to be able to enact solidarity in ways that meet the demands of accountability, transparency and participation, workshop participants put forward the idea that solidarity **needs a ‘last name’**. In other words, **solidarity, as a philosophical concept and as an ethical principle, needs an accompanying term that can ground it and give it more substance, as well as political and ethical specificity**.

“Without a grounding ethical and political ‘last name’, solidarity can easily be reduced to some sort of charitable act, or an emotion like sympathy or commiseration.”



Reference:

Mesoamerican Workshop on Solidarity and Global Health Workshop report. February 2025, Costa Rica.



Moving Beyond
Solidarity Rhetoric
in Global Health

CONTACT US:

Email: globalhealthsolidarity@ug.edu.gh

Website: www.globalhealthsolidarity.org



Global Health Solidarity Network



Global Health Solidarity Network



@officialghsn



@official_ghsn



Funded by
Wellcome Trust