

Stories of Hope and Resistance from Chile: EPES' Community Action During the COVID-19 Pandemic

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’” Matthew 25:31-40

In the midst of the suffering and uncertainty ravaging our world since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, as Christians we are called to be co-creators of a more just future. This series, **Stories of Hope and Resistance from Chile**, presents accounts of concrete ways EPES is working to address the crisis as it affects the communities, families and people we love and work with in Chile. The first issue in the series discussed the work EPES is doing to facilitate the process of cultivating home vegetable gardens as a long-term approach to address issues of hunger and food sovereignty. In this issue, we share the work we have been doing to address immediate hunger by supporting health promoters and immigrant communities as they organize *ollas comunes* in their communities. The U.N.'s World Food Program states that the coronavirus pandemic has put nearly 14 million people in the Caribbean and Latin America at risk of going hungry. With the inability of governments to respond promptly and adequately, community organization and solidarity actions are the only ways to confront the hunger crisis and create long-lasting alliances within local neighborhoods.

– **Karen Anderson, ELCA Global Mission personnel in Chile and Director of EPES' International Training Program**

The combined public health, economic and social crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic has brought back the *olla común*, or “collective pot,” the neighborhood soup kitchens famous for staving off hunger in periods of hardship in Chile. These were—and still are—largely community-based efforts, led by women.

Increased unemployment has made it difficult for working-class families to make ends meet. In response, *ollas comunes* have mushroomed throughout Chile in the past 5 months, as happened in the 1980s, when women held the fort against widespread hunger (a key element of resistance to the dictatorship).

Health promoters in three community health groups trained by EPES in the 1980s, (Llaretta, David Werner and Circle of Women for Health) are participating in *ollas comunes* in southern Santiago, spurred to action by witnessing their neighbors' precarious conditions and difficulty in feeding their children. Putting aside their fear of infection and undaunted by the challenge of preparing food for over a hundred people, the women are motivated by solidarity and commitment to their community.

Angélica Arredondo Aros, a health promoter in the David Werner health group, has seen many of her neighbors in the El Bosque district jobless, struggling to sustain their families and support the elderly. Hunger, says Angélica, is one of the most visible problems that arose due to growing unemployment. But women of this working-class neighborhood have many other needs. “The confinement and fear arising from the crisis, which not only affects our health but also the economy, hitting the poorest the hardest, have caused depression in many people. The EPES Foundation prepared very helpful informational material about COVID-19 that the David Werner group shared



The Almendro 1 soup kitchen provides 200 lunches Monday through Friday.

with neighborhood families. When we began walking around the neighborhood, we discovered that some families adhering to the quarantine had nothing to eat. Moreover, they did not know what to do, how to take care of themselves and protect themselves from infection, nor where to go to get tested. At that point in the crisis, the government was telling people to stay home, not to go outside, but how were families supposed to eat? The government did not offer a solution or help us in any way.”* Angélica, and her mother Mirsa, also a member of the health team, are two of the women who started an *olla común* in their neighborhood that feeds hundreds of people several days a week.

Dixa Contreras, a health promoter in the Circle of Women for Health group and organizer of the Almendro 1 neighborhood *olla común*, notes the vital importance of these community kitchens in mitigating the stark reality of hunger. She also points out the essential element of solidarity that characterizes them. “It makes me sad to see families I have known for years in such a dire, impoverished state. At the *olla común*, we provide 200 lunches every day, Monday through Friday. Three times a week we bake homemade bread (500 buns daily) that we give out with a cup of hot milk in the afternoon. We know that this is but a drop in the bucket, considering the critical situation so many families experience, but at least it assures them of one good meal every day.

When we started the *olla común*, we asked family and friends to contribute food to cook. Later, others got on board, and now the solidarity keeps growing. From the start, EPES helped us immensely. It provided safety and protective equipment for all the women who cook and serve the meals, to make sure we don't catch COVID-19. EPES staff has been in constant contact, helping with any need that might arise. One day a storm left us without a roof. That very day, EPES provided resources to buy two canvas tarps so we could continue working and serve lunches to our people.”



Neighbors coming together to support the olla común in the local community center in Población Oscar Bonilla, home to David Werner health group.

Mónica Pérez, a Llaretta health group educator, lives in an apartment complex that is home to 126 low-income families in La Pintana. Sheer need prompted several women to come together to set up an *olla común*, which at its peak, fed 200 people a day, Monday through Friday. The first meals they prepare every day are for residents infected with coronavirus or who are sheltering in place. They then proceed to go into the street, where the neighbors form a line snaking up to the servers, with senior citizens and physically challenged people first in line.

“Before, under the dictatorship, and, once again today, EPES is where it is needed most. This time around, it has responded by helping mitigate hunger. EPES has provided food and protective gear to prevent the women who work at the *olla común* from becoming infected. That has been very important because they are often their households’ main breadwinners, with children and elderly relatives under their care.”

Mónica recalls participating in an *olla común* in the La Bandera neighborhood community center in 1984, when the Llaretta health group was just beginning to form. Hunger and low-paying jobs were prevalent in those days. The only work for many people was with the government minimum-wage job program. “People donated food; and we would go out to ask for food at the farmers’ market.” The same dynamics operate today. “People come by and leave us squash, a kilo of potatoes, and the ingredients are gathered. There was no support from government offices. But even narco-traffickers from the north Santiago neighborhood of La Pincoya brought us 30 kilos of chicken.”

Jimmy Marcelin is a 39-year-old Haitian immigrant, the father of a 2-year-old son; he arrived in Chile in 2016 and lives in El Bosque. He is president of the Union for Haitian Progress in Chile (UNHAPROCH), an organization that has operated in El Bosque for three years.



“EPES respects people’s dignity. UNHAPROCH has often refused help from other sources when it has come with strings attached. They want to photograph us to show the poverty our people live in on Facebook and other social networks. Someone who is sick or hungry should not be exposed in that way. Everyone should have something to eat.”

— Jimmy Marcelin, Haitian immigrant

The organization’s relationship with EPES began in 2019, during the initial phase of EPES’ project “Immigrants have the right to health.” Jimmy considers the relationship significant, and says it is different than that with other institutions because it was built on respect. He affirms: “EPES respects people’s dignity. UNHAPROCH has often refused help from other sources when it has come with strings attached. They want to photograph us to show the poverty our people live in on Facebook and other social networks. Someone who is sick or hungry should not be exposed in that way. Everyone should have something to eat.”



Haitian community members come together to cook traditional Haitian meals for their families and neighbors. Upper left: EPES with the Haitian community has been developing resource materials about COVID-19 in Creole.



“I can’t find words to thank EPES. Last year, with their help, we organized a Christmas party for Haitian children, and now we have started an *olla común* specifically for immigrant families. There is also ongoing communication, EPES is always available when we need them.” Jimmy explained, “The soup kitchen arose because many Haitian families had nothing to eat. Some families had food, noodles and oil, but no gas for cooking. I spoke with EPES because we Haitians had no experience in this type of community action. EPES organized a Zoom meeting with me, EPES staff and Dixá, a health promoter who shared information on how to organize a soup kitchen.

At that time, we didn’t have a place, we didn’t have the materials, we didn’t have the resources. We needed a big pot and a kitchen. Haitian food is different and more expensive than Chilean food. Despite all the difficulties, with EPES’ help and Dixá’s advice, we launched our first soup kitchen in July. Since then it has operated on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, delivering 120 plates of food per day.”

There is a saying in Chile (popular in graffiti): Only the people help the people. The *ollas comunes* are an example of people helping themselves and each other, when government policy fails them.

**It is important to note that El Bosque is the place where, on May 18, in the middle of the lockdown, hundreds of people came out into the streets to denounce the hunger they were experiencing. Their protests sparked similar demonstrations and expressions of discontent in other parts of Santiago and throughout the country. Alarmed, the government responded by announcing a plan to deliver boxes of groceries, a ludicrously insufficient stopgap measure, in light of the magnitude of the economic crisis.*



EPES was created in 1982 to promote health with dignity for the poor through empowerment, mobilization and collective action. It began as a program of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chile (IELCH) and maintains close ties nationally and internationally with the Lutheran church and is an ELCA Global Mission supported ministry. EPES became an independent, non-profit Chilean foundation in 2002.

