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Your support at work



Saving lives: Oxfam partners take center stage

Oxfam invests in the strengths of local communities and partners. When rainfall from a tropical depression triggered a massive emergency in El Salvador, our approach was put to the test.

MARCH 2012 | by Elizabeth Stevens

In El Salvador, the landscapes are stunningly beautiful. From the coastal plain, wide expanses of pasture and cropland reach to a distant skyline of volcanoes and jagged mountain ranges. But the natural forces at work here are powerful. Earthquakes are an ever-present danger; hurricanes sweep in from east and west; and even the volcanoes erupt from time to time. For those who can't afford a sturdy home on a safe piece of land, fear is a constant companion.

Building capacity, from the grassroots up

Oxfam is committed to supporting El Salvador's most vulnerable communities at times of disaster, but rather than pour

emergency funds into our own experts, we have made a long-term investment in the communities themselves, and in the network of Salvadoran civil society organizations that embrace them.

"By bringing in international experts for every emergency, you're resolving short-term needs but not contributing to sustainability—to people solving their own problems," explains Karina Copen, Oxfam's humanitarian program officer in El Salvador. "When local people respond to emergencies, it's faster and comes with cultural awareness, and the knowledge and capacity are installed in the country."

So, a decade ago Oxfam and partners began working with at-risk communities

to ensure they knew how to protect their health and safety in emergencies, and to inform them of their right to assistance when they need it. At the national level, Oxfam partners fought for a law that would focus not only on disaster response but on reducing risks, and that would cast community members as vital participants in the national civil protection system. In 2005, the work of Oxfam partners and allies and Salvadoran citizens bore fruit: the legislature enacted the Law on Civil Protection, Prevention, and Mitigation of Disasters.

A dedicated team of *técnicos*

Still, there were gaps, and lives depended on filling them. In 2007, Oxfam and a group

Oxfam supports local partners and long-term solutions. This well, installed at a school by partner PROVIDA, protects public health in emergencies by providing an alternative to contaminated floodwater. Year-round it supplies children like Grecia Umaña with a source of clean water. René Figueroa / Oxfam America

of Salvadoran nongovernmental organizations created a new entity: a team of 17 Salvadorans dedicated to protecting public health in poor communities, particularly during emergencies—with Oxfam providing training, coordination, and financial support. Over the course of the next two years, the *técnicos*, as they are called, became experts in water, sanitation, and hygiene promotion (WASH). They learned to install water tanks and latrines, test water quality, and more. The response to Hurricane Ida in 2009 proved their readiness (the team works independently of the government but in close coordination with the national system of civil protection), and soon they were hard at work imparting their skills to volunteers from nearly 150 at-risk communities.



Oxfam and their partners ... have an ethic of deep commitment to the communities.

—Arnoldo Cruz, Salvadoran Ministry of Health

In an emergency, the work of the WASH team is grueling, with few opportunities even for eating or sleeping, but the enthusiasm of its members is unequivocal. “Being on the WASH team—I love it,” says Melvin Elias. “I’m happy because I can do good while doing what I love. I can help people.”

In a catastrophic storm, a swift response

In October 2011, Oxfam’s investment in El Salvador’s communities, the WASH team, and the national civil protection law were put to the test when a tropical depression settled over Central America. For nine days, torrential rains pounded the region,

dropping 60 inches on El Salvador—far more than in the historic Hurricane Mitch of 1998.

As rivers threatened to exceed their banks, the WASH team sprang into action. Community team members reported on local conditions, *técnicos* rushed to the hardest-hit areas, and equipment and supplies were dispatched from the Oxfam warehouse. By the time the government announced a national state of emergency, the WASH team was already serving thousands of people affected by the floods.

Meanwhile, thanks to the new civil protection law, designated community members were safely evacuating their neighbors. Civil protection volunteer Nixon Mejía recalls the afternoon that floodwaters threatened his coastal village. “The evacuation was done in an hour. By 11 p.m. we were finished rescuing the animals. I was very cold, but it’s gratifying when you make it to the shelter and see everyone is there. Nobody died, because everyone was prepared.”

In the communities, a growing confidence

In El Salvador, 239 people died in Hurricane Mitch; in last year’s floods, which were nearly double the magnitude, the death toll was 35. The growing capacity of El Salvador’s government, communities, nongovernmental organizations, and WASH team is almost certainly saving lives; and because much of the knowledge and experience gained from this emergency is firmly embedded in the country, perhaps next time the losses will be fewer.



A WASH team member tests drinking water for safe chlorine levels. “After a flood, a lot of people get sick,” says Milagro Gonzalez, a community health volunteer. “But after this one, there were fewer who needed support from me.” *René Figueroa / Oxfam America*

But the success of Oxfam’s partners goes further. Many of those who live in the path of floods in El Salvador are gaining a measure of confidence in the future. In the hard-hit village of La Pelota, San Miguel, where the evacuation was timely and well-planned, already work is under way with an Oxfam partner to reduce the risk of flooding in coming months. “We feel we are better prepared for emergencies now,” says resident Victor Rivera. “We know what to do.”

Around the world, Oxfam is challenging international aid providers to invest in the strengths that exist in disaster-affected countries—in the skills, speed, and dedication that local people can bring to saving lives in emergencies and to building a safer future.

Do one more thing today: Spread the word



RENÉ FIGUEROA / OXFAM AMERICA

There is more to handling emergencies than distributing aid. Reducing risks, building knowledge and resilience, and urging governments to shoulder their responsibilities are crucial to preventing unnecessary suffering and loss. Read “Crises in a New World Order,” oxfamamerica.org/challenges, Oxfam’s challenge to the status quo—and help us spread the word.



226 Causeway Street, 5th Floor
Boston, MA 02114-2206
(800) 77-OXFAM
oxfamamerica.org

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