



# Oxfam Impact

Your support at work



## Yellow alert: Taking action to prevent disasters

Months of community education and preparation saved lives when floods struck El Salvador

By Elizabeth Stevens

When a torrential rainstorm pounded the central provinces of El Salvador in November of 2009, rivers rose swiftly in the night and swept away houses that clung to their banks. One hundred ninety-eight people were killed. But in the towns that had joined forces with Oxfam to prepare for disasters, there was something to celebrate: everyone survived.

### When to run for your life

If poverty forces you to make your home in the path of hazards like hurricanes, volcanoes, and earthquakes—or, in the case of El Salvador, perhaps all three—your survival can depend on knowing when and how to evacuate. Oxfam and its Salvadoran partners have identified 195 towns and villages that are particularly vulnerable to hazards. We are helping teams of local volunteers there learn the nuts and bolts

of saving lives: how to assess risks, evacuate homes, stabilize injuries, and prepare shelters. We equipped them with two-way radios, megaphones, first-aid supplies, bright vests, flashlights, and more.

That was the easy part.

### Building a culture of protection

Those who live in the most precarious locations, like the steep banks of rivers, have no insurance policies and no easy way to replace whatever they lose, so a decision to evacuate can be anguished, causing fatal delays.

When November's storm struck the town of Fenadesal Sur, dumping 14 inches of rain in just four hours, it transformed the gentle Acelhuate River into a deep and powerful torrent that ripped away bridges and obliterated homes.

But for months before the disaster, members of a local civil-protection committee had worked with Oxfam and Salvadoran partner PROCOMES (Asociación de Proyectos Comunes de El Salvador) to educate their community about what to do in just such a crisis. They had posted brightly colored signs along the safest evacuation routes and placed ads on local buses about emergency procedures. They had provided young people with a special emergency ringtone for their cell phones and introduced a new version of hopscotch to children—one where learning the simple steps to safe evacuation is the key to success.

Children race along an evacuation route in Fenadesal Sur, where community members saw to it that no lives were lost. *Claudia Barrientos / Oxfam America*

So when committee member Ana Vilma Gochez took to the streets of Fenadesal Sur with a megaphone, calling, "Attention. Yellow alert. We ask that people evacuate the area," for the most part, they did.

The losses were serious—30 houses destroyed and more than 100 damaged—but the 300 people whose homes were at risk made it to safety in time.

### Women take the lead

Although in the communities of El Salvador men usually fill the most visible leadership roles, the disaster-preparedness teams that Oxfam's partners work with are in many cases composed of women.

In the town of Aragon, a local environmental group led by women is working not only to prepare the community for flooding disasters but also to reduce the flooding itself. With Oxfam partner PROVIDA by its side, the group publicly challenged a landowner upstream whose land-use practices have been compounding floods by allowing debris to fill the bed of the nearby Garroba River.

"Part of my role is helping women see themselves as leaders," says Flor Gamez of PROVIDA. By all accounts, she is doing her work well. "In the beginning, we used to do the press conferences ourselves because many of the women were shy," she says, "but now the women don't even bother to tell us when they're holding them."

The community group's first battle in court was a win: the landowner was forced to build huge terraces to stabilize his land and protect the river.

The mitigation work has made a difference, says Mercedes Rivas, a member of the group. When Hurricane Stan, the last comparable storm, struck Aragon, 12 houses were completely inundated, including her own. She lost everything she owned. But in the November storm, the river didn't flood a single house.

Still, several riverside communities required evacuation. The women fanned out into the most endangered neighborhoods, knocking on doors to get people out of their beds and out of their houses. In one area four houses were flooded, but, says Rivas, "By the time the water got in, the people were gone."

### Training, plus dedication

For three years a team of aid providers from 21 Salvadoran organizations has trained for an emergency like the November floods. In a program spearheaded by Oxfam, they have learned how to get emergency clean water and sanitation facilities up and running quickly at camps and shelters. So when the heavy rains triggered a major landslide in the town of Verapaz, team members were ready for deployment.

"The preparedness," says Omar Barahona, who participated in the training and disaster response, "was excellent."

### A hope for our grandchildren

"Disaster preparedness saves lives. Our experience tells us this," says Oxfam disaster risk reduction specialist Jacobo Ocharan. "It paves the way for a quick,



The warehouse in El Salvador that Oxfam and partners keep stocked with water, sanitation, and hygiene supplies for 8,000 people enables us to speed assistance to disaster survivors who have been forced to leave their homes. *Claudia Barrientos / Oxfam America*

well-coordinated response to an emergency, and by focusing on strengthening the communities' own capacities, over time it will reduce the need for Oxfam resources and interventions."

It is a step in the direction of security—and the peace of mind that comes with it.

"What we want is for our grandchildren to have tranquility—for them not to live the anguish we have suffered through the years," says Rivas. For that, she says, "It is very important to be prepared before, during, and after an emergency. That is what we work for."

## Do one more thing today: Help expose the link between poverty and disasters



Donors like you help save lives by investing in Oxfam's efforts to prevent natural events like floods or earthquakes from causing devastating losses. You don't have to look far to see the link between poverty and the disasters that befall people living in precarious conditions. Substandard housing. Dangerous locations. These are the burdens poor people around the world bear—a reality that invites disaster, like the one that devastated our neighbor, Haiti, when the quake of Jan. 12 struck. It left 230,000 people dead and more than a million homeless.

Why? Poverty puts people in harm's way. Watch our two-minute video on the link between poverty and disasters—[oxfamamerica.org/poverty-disaster-link](http://oxfamamerica.org/poverty-disaster-link)—and then share it with friends. If more people understood the role that poverty plays, together we could take action to prevent future disasters.



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