

How young Salvadorans are preparing communities for disasters

THE PROBLEM

During the past 15 years, the communities in the Acahuapa River region of the department of San Vicente, El Salvador, have been deeply affected by a series of natural disasters, including earthquakes, hurricanes, tropical storms, flooding, mudslides and prolonged drought. These disasters have resulted in significant social, economic and environmental loss, making communities highly vulnerable to increased rates of poverty and displacement.

Other issues have made the problem worse, including a lack of economic opportunity and civic engagement and greater levels of violence among young people. These factors contribute to high rates of emigration, particularly in the aftermath of natural disasters when families are unable to recover their losses and meet their basic shelter, health care and livelihood needs.

“The greatest loss of food that El Salvador has experienced was caused by Hurricane Mitch (\$112 million), followed by the Tropical Depression 12-E (\$105.3 million).”

—El Diario de Hoy, April 9, 2013

THE CRS RESPONSE

Catholic Relief Services and our local partner Caritas of San Vicente are implementing a program called Youth-Led Community Disaster Risk Reduction in the Acahuapa River Watershed of San Vicente, El Salvador. The program is funded by U.S. Agency for International Development/Office of Foreign Disaster assistance.

The initiative strengthens leadership within vulnerable communities, particularly by strengthening the role of young people, to develop strategies for disaster risk reduction. This increases community resilience in the face of natural disasters. It also expands opportunities for young people, strengthening their motivation and potential to build a future within their own communities.

Recent natural disasters in El Salvador

Year	Natural Disaster	Impact
1998	Hurricane Mitch	240 people died and more than 10,000 homes were destroyed or damaged
2001	Earthquakes	944 people died and more than 1.3 million people were left homeless
2005	Hurricane Stan	Total estimated loss of more than \$38 million
2009	Tropical Storm Ida	The department of San Vicente was highly affected: 92 people died, 66 people disappeared, 698 homes were destroyed or damaged, 11 bridges were destroyed or damaged, 36 schools were damaged and 6 potable water systems were damaged



NAME OF THE PROGRAM

Youth-Led Community Disaster Risk Reduction in the Acahuapa River Watershed of San Vicente, El Salvador

YEARS

2011–2013

LOCATION

El Salvador, in the Acahuapa River region of the department of San Vicente

FUNDING

\$257,200 from USAID/OFDA

PEOPLE THE PROGRAM IS HELPING

6,800 people, including more than 400 people who have received training



The program includes the following key components:

- Training and organizing community members to implement risk-reduction strategies such as hazard mapping and protection planning, evacuation planning, first aid, temporary-shelter construction, damage assessments and needs assessments
- Developing community-level civil protection committees (CCPCs) and linking them to municipal governments, national governments and risk-management officials
- Strengthening the emergency preparation and response capacity of municipal governments through training sessions and contingency planning
- Implementing community risk-mitigation projects (including building reinforcement walls for riverbanks, conducting campaigns to improve trash management and to remove debris from drainage systems, and creating strategic food reserves)

RESULTS

Increased community resilience in the face of natural disasters

The program has trained more than 400 community members, 96 of whom are young people between the ages of 16 and 24. They have learned skills for disaster risk reduction, preparedness, mitigation and response. As a result of the project, communities are creating local risk management plans, raising awareness and resources in their communities, and carrying out disaster-mitigation initiatives. Eight youths were trained to build metal silos, which will be used to store reserves of corn and beans. These strategic community food reserves will provide nutrition to 550 families during the first 72 hours of an emergency.

Participants have formed 18 community-level civil protection committees, which serve as touchstones in their communities for disaster preparation and emergency response initiatives. The committees are legally incorporated in the National Civil Protection System and officially recognized as the liaison between the community and the government of El Salvador for emergency response and disaster risk reduction efforts.

Alternatives for young people

The program not only reaches out to young people through the community-level committees but also engages youths through service opportunities. An additional 190 young people participate in youth groups that are focused on disaster risk reduction. These youth groups have contributed to the committees' activities, which include clean-up campaigns, forest fire control, community awareness-raising through informational murals and dissemination of community risk maps and protection plans. Their service in the community provides an opportunity for engagement, building self-esteem and relationships with others, and strengthening their identification with their region of the country.

Participation in these community-based groups, which offers the opportunity to develop new skills, leadership abilities and community connections, provides young people with tools and networks that they need in order to create solutions to their communities' problems. As community members develop a greater sense of ownership and increased resilience, they become less vulnerable to natural disasters.



Front (detail) and back (bottom thumbnail): Members of a community-level civil protection committee. *Elizabeth Hurtado* for CRS. Back (top thumbnail): Graduates of the program with their certificates. *Adán Figueroa Hernández/Carit as San Vicente*.