Update on climate change activities in Latin America

Funded by the ‘Dutch National Lottery’, the Red Cross in Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Columbia and Guatemala work to strengthen the resilience of people most at risk of the adverse effects of climate change. Many of them are poor. They face floods, hurricanes, droughts and often massive deforestation, making them vulnerable to natural disasters. Red Cross efforts to help them include raising awareness on the risks of climate change, implementing micro projects enabling them to deal with its negative effects, developing disaster plans and setting up alliances with government institutions, universities, media, businesses and other stakeholders in adapting to climate change.

As a result, modules made by the Red Cross, together with universities and the Ministry of Environment, have been integrated in school curricula. Good relations with national meteorological offices and co-operation within the national disaster management system have improved the (dissemination of) information on extreme weather events.

Communicating climate change
And much more has been done to inform and educate people on the issue. In Columbia, a forum on climate change was organized on April 19th in connection with Earth Day, three days later. Also, in two villages schoolchildren wrote and produced a play about climate change. Communication students at the Javeriana University, who are Red Cross volunteers, made banners illustrating the subject, and developed materials for children on what climate change is and what children themselves can do to contribute to preventing climate change and its disasters. The students in addition produced a puppet show, which is a major success. The script in Spanish (with music!) is available and is about the earth being ill and running a temperature. In Guatemala, the show has been adapted, using characters painted on boards which are handheld, while in Nicaragua two students who are also Red Cross volunteers wrote a charming fairy tale to tell children about climate change.

The Costa Rica Red Cross extensively celebrated World Environment Day (June 5th), together with the National Museum, organizing an event fizzling with music, art, video, debates, presentations, children’s activities and info provided by multiple organizations. At the event, the Red Cross launched a booklet on good practices for the use of water.

Micro projects
But it is not just words the Red Cross offers on the risks of climate change; it also acts to reduce these risks. Volunteers from the Chiquimula Branch in Guatemala for example have completed Vulnerability and Capacity Assessments together with inhabitants of ten villages (an eleventh may follow). Based on the assessment, the villages selected micro projects to help them ward off dangers. Many have opted for reforestation, which has been initiated recently. Funding is sufficient to plant a small area of forest. To this end, the Red Cross is liaising with the Ministry of
Agriculture and the Agricultural School, since they have the required know-how. The trees chosen are often fruit and neem trees. Neem trees provide shade and produce a natural pesticide which can be useful against mosquitoes, whose numbers in some areas are increasing as a result of climate change.

In other communities, school buildings will be adjusted to make them suitable as a temporary place of refuge, which for instance means a containment wall is to be built to protect against mudslides. Elsewhere, small dams may be necessary to protect buildings from the river. One community chose to purchase first aid materials needed in case of emergency, such as stretchers. Communities in the other three countries have selected similar projects after completing their Vulnerability and Capacity Assessments.

For more information, please contact Esther Barend, ebarend@cruzrojaholandesa.org