



# Building community resilience in Pueblo Viejo

Disaster response is often organized centrally, while building first-line capacity can help communities to act effectively themselves.

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Pueblo Viejo is a fishing community on a narrow strip of land on the Colombian coast. It is situated between the Caribbean Sea and a large lagoon, which forms the delta of the Rio Magdalena. Like so many vulnerable communities worldwide, the inhabitants are increasingly feeling the impact of a changing climate. In recent years Pueblo Viejo has been affected by a series of extreme events. Flooding, strong winds and severe coastal erosion are all increasing as a result of climate change. According to INVEMAR, a local marine and coastal environment research centre, Pueblo Viejo may well be totally inundated by 2030.

When a disaster or extreme event happens in a place like Pueblo Viejo, the local community is first to respond. In the hours following a disaster, search and rescue and immediate assistance to the injured and homeless are done almost entirely by family members, relatives and neighbours. In the case of small-scale events, communities may even be left entirely to their own devices, as there may be no external assistance available at all. Conventional disaster response programmes often fail to address the specific vulnerabilities, needs and demands of at-risk communities. However, it is easier to identify these vulnerabilities through a process of direct consultation and dialogue with the com-

munities concerned, because they understand local realities and contexts better than outsiders.

## Local resources

Even the most vulnerable communities possess skills, knowledge, resources (materials, labour) and capacities. These assets are often overlooked and underutilized and, in some cases, even undermined by centralized disaster response actions. The Red Cross uses a community-based approach that actively involves local people in the identification and analysis of the risks they are facing, and gets them to participate directly in planning, implementing and evaluating disaster risk activities.

For the last two years the Colombian Red Cross has implemented community-based disaster risk and adaptation activities in Pueblo Viejo, with support from the Netherlands Red Cross. The project started with a vulnerability and capacity assessment. The local community participated in an assessment of the climate risks they face, and then developed an action plan, together with the Red Cross, based on their needs and priorities. Awareness-raising and sensitization activities were organized to inform community members about the climate induced risks they are facing. For this an innovative Cli-

Tide gauge indicating different alarm phases.



**Local communities are the first to respond when a disaster or extreme event happens**



PHOTOS: RED CROSS



mate Toolkit was developed, consisting of a board game and a puppet show.

### Preparedness

In Pueblo Viejo, disaster response was strengthened by setting up disaster committees (*brigadas*). First aid training was given and the brigadas were equipped with search and rescue materials, such as stretchers, shovels, spades and ropes, and communication materials, including radios and megaphones. Schoolteachers

and children were given disaster preparedness training.

Another important activity involved preparation for early warning and timely evacuation in the event of swells and storm surges. Signposted evacuation routes were developed and all community members took part in evacuation drills. Tide gauges were installed along the coastline, poles which indicate the different alarm phases – green: no action needed; yellow: flood-

ing has started and population needs to prepare for a possible evacuation; red: evacuation required to a safe location on higher ground.

The inhabitants of Pueblo Viejo also indicated that the extreme events they face have a strong impact on their health and the drinking water supply. A number of community members were therefore trained to deal with diarrhoeal and respiratory diseases. Health kits containing essential drugs were provided, and they are regularly replenished by the local health posts.

The poor quality of drinking water was identified as one of the main causes of the high infant mortality in the community. Especially after floods, drinking water is heavily contaminated and this substantially increases the amount of disease in the community. The Colombian Red Cross therefore developed a system so that households can store their own drinking water in small water tanks above flood water levels.

### Confident

By engaging the local community, building on existing capacities and developing solutions that are adapted to the local context, this initiative has made a big contribution to increasing the resilience of this vulnerable delta community. Community members recently expressed the view that they are now confident that they will be able to face extreme events in the future with only limited support from outside.

The Netherlands Red Cross intends to use the lessons it learned in Colombia in a new initiative, the 'Partners for Resilience Alliance'. Five Dutch organizations (Netherlands Red Cross, Cordaid, CARE, Wetlands International and The Red Cross/Red Crescent Climate Centre) will work together to soften the impact of natural hazards in nine countries through a combination of disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation and ecosystem management and restoration. ■

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