



Building Equitable Transitional Shelters in Guatemala

In May of 2010, torrential rainfall from Tropical Storm Agatha spurred devastating landslides in Guatemala's highland communities and widespread flooding in lowland coastal areas. More than 150 people lost their lives, and thousands were left homeless as a result of this event. In conjunction with the U.S. Agency for International Development's Office for Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA) and other donors, Catholic Relief Services and local partners launched a multisector response to help families build safe, durable and environmentally responsible transitional shelters.

WORKING TOGETHER FOR THOUGHTFUL REBUILDING

The highlands town of San Lucas Tolimán was one of the communities hardest hit by landslides. Immediately after the storm, local leaders formed a reconstruction committee to coordinate the emergency response and reconstruction efforts. Numerous stakeholders joined the committee—representatives from the school system, the health center, the local community development councils, nongovernmental organizations and local churches, including the Parish of San Lucas Tolimán (CRS' local implementing partner). The committee worked with the local government to evaluate damages to the homes and property of nearly 900 families. They categorized families based on the degree of damage to the homes, the homes' vulnerability to future landslides and the families' financial resources. This collaborative process provided a transparent and objective means for CRS and the parish to select the 60 most vulnerable families for a transitional shelter project.

These families joined rotating work teams to build 60 shelters and install water and sanitation systems for the community with construction materials and technical assistance provided by CRS and USAID. CRS and the parish provided opportunities for the families to implement sustainable building practices and innovative green technologies to reduce costs, promote healthier living and



Members of beneficiary families contributed labor to the project in rotating work teams. With technical assistance and construction materials provided by USAID and CRS, the beneficiary families constructed 60 shelters and assisted with the installation of the water and sanitation systems. *Julio César Morales/Parish of San Lucas Tolimán*



Rafael Ajcot Sosof, construction foreman for the project, stands with members of his family and his new neighbors in front of the shelters they constructed. Julio César Morales/Parish of San Lucas Tolimán

reduce their impact on the environment, thereby decreasing the risk of future disasters.

INSTALLING BANANA CIRCLES AND ECOSTOVES

Building sanitation systems was an important part of San Lucas Tolimán's response to the disaster. The installation of a banana circle in each shelter provided an efficient and effective sanitation solution while bestowing upon the families other positive effects. Families dug conical pits in front of shelters and filled the pits with layers of large rocks, small rocks and gravel. The pits catch gray water from showers and sinks, and the water nourishes banana plants that grow in a ring around the filter. The circles absorb hazardous standing water, provide the means to compost organic waste from the kitchen and provide large leaves that are used to prepare traditional Guatemalan



A project beneficiary finishes installing a banana circle, an innovative type of gray water filter, in front of her new home.
Lauren Young/CRS Guatemala

foods. It is a practical and ecological way to recycle waste water and minimize environmental impact.

Teams also installed portable stoves in each of the 60 shelters. Each small stove has a round cooking surface directly above an insulated chamber in which wood is burned, a model designed to accommodate various sizes of pots and heat tortillas, a staple of



Above: A project beneficiary heats tortillas on the cooking surface of her portable improved stove. *Edy Morales/Parish of San Lucas Tolimán*. Front sidebar: Sonya Judit Baran Ajcot stands with her three young children in front of her new home. She remarks, "Now we have hope for our children."
Lauren Young/CRS Guatemala

the Guatemalan diet. In comparison to the alternative of cooking over an open flame on the ground, the new stoves provide a safe means to manage the fire and vent the smoke to the exterior. The stoves are also very efficient, requiring significantly less wood and thereby reducing the new community's impact on local forests. "This will... mean that less time will have to be spent hunting for firewood," observed Rafael Ajcot Sosof, construction foreman for the project. "The women liked this design the most because the cooking surface is round.

HELPING FAMILIES TO BETTER HELP THEMSELVES

Prior to moving to their new homes, the beneficiary families had been living day-to-day in cramped emergency shelters or doubled up with family members. The transitional shelters have provided the foundation, both physically and emotionally, for the beneficiary families to rebuild their lives. These new homes represent new hope and determination and serve as a springboard for the entire recovery effort, helping families to better help themselves.

Sonya Judit Baran Ajcot remarked, "We evacuated our home about ten minutes before it was destroyed in the landslide. We lost everything. Afterwards, I found myself in the emergency shelter with so many other families. I had no idea what to do or where to go. We lost everything. This is why I am so proud of our new home. Now we have hope for our children."

Rafael Ajcot Sosof, the construction foreman for the project and also household head of one of the beneficiary families, noted, "This project changed everything for me and my family. After the storm, we all thought we would be forgotten. But then this project came about and it means that we are now starting over. And we are not starting from zero."

Julio César Morales, staff member of the Parish and architect of the transitional shelter area, cites the reconstruction committee as a primary reason that the parish was able to successfully lead the implementation of the project. "If the parish had had the task of selecting families for the project without having had the categorized lists, we probably would have selected a different group of families. We probably would have selected the families on the basis of poverty more than anything, because that is what we would have been capable of doing. Instead, we had the lists that let us be more objective. And that was really the best way to select families, according to their vulnerability and what had happened to them in the storm." Members of the community also clearly understood the selection criteria for the project and were aware that the selection process had been carried out by various stakeholders. "Because the responsibility was spread among many different actors," Morales said, "it allowed us to be more transparent, and for those in the community to see it that way, too."