

# POUNDS OF PREVENTION

- A Disaster Risk Reduction Story -

*"Pounds of Prevention" is a series of short articles that illustrate how disaster risk reduction works and why it is important. Take a behind-the-scenes look at aid work in action, long before the disaster occurs. How is that possible? Read on!*

## FOCUS: GUATEMALA

Many people in Guatemala live in areas prone to natural hazards. Earthquakes, volcanoes, storms, floods, and landslides have all challenged the population and spurred the country to take action to prepare for and lessen the effects of disasters.

In some indigenous communities, such as Tecpán Municipality in Chimaltenango Department, poverty and isolation have left residents particularly vulnerable to the negative consequences of disasters. After helping respond to emergency needs following hurricanes Stan in 2005 and Mitch in 1998, USAID and its partners began a program to strengthen the ability of 27 remote Tecpán communities to prepare for and respond to disasters.

Among its many accomplishments, the program has facilitated the creation of a dedicated office to manage all facets of municipal risk management. The committed and trained staff members serve as liaisons to government officials, oversee risk reduction projects, manage emergency shelters, coordinate with local police and fire departments, and plug into the wider national emergency response system to ensure the effectiveness of all related investments.

In particular, the municipal risk management office coordinates the activities of 27 local disaster management committees, one in each participating village in Tecpán. Providing guidance in the local language, USAID's partners trained committee members on lessons learned from past disasters in Guatemala and the natural hazards present in their communities. USAID also provided the villagers with basic equipment to use in the event of a disaster, including radios, hard hats, flashlights, stretchers, shovels, and first aid kits.

This knowledge and training helped save lives in May 2010 when Tropical Storm Agatha's heavy rains caused a landslide in the village of Giralda that destroyed several homes. Fortunately, no fatalities occurred because one active program participant heeded warning signs and evacuated his neighbors away from the steep slopes of the village in advance of the storm.

Through the program, residents also gained hands-on experience in disaster response activities, including damage assessment, data compilation, radio communications, and life-saving first aid including cardiopulmonary resuscitation and treatment of limb fractures. More than 400 volunteers put their abilities to the test during an earthquake and landslide simulation in July 2011. The experience not only validated the Tecpán emergency response system, but also instilled confidence in the participants.

When a powerful magnitude 7.4 earthquake struck off the Pacific coast of Guatemala on November 7, 2012, Tecpán Municipality took all appropriate actions to activate local disaster management committees and send staff to evaluate damaged buildings. The earthquake caused only minor damage in Tecpán. Nevertheless, the training, technical assistance, and emergency response equipment provided by the USAID-funded program ensured that the communities responded to the earthquake in an organized and capable manner. When disaster strikes in the future, USAID remains confident that its investments in disaster risk reduction in Tecpán will again save lives.



*The Tecpán Municipal Disaster Reduction Committee meets to discuss risk reduction priorities for the 2012 rainy season. Photo by Auriana Koutnik, USAID.*



*More than 400 volunteers take part in a mock earthquake and landslide to test the Tecpán disaster response system. Photo courtesy of SHARE Guatemala.*