

Rural women's perspective and participation in community resilience



"I am part of the COLRED, I'm in the first aid commission; my responsibility is to help my neighbors. Before working with CARE and Asociación Vivamos Mejor, we did not have a COLRED, we didn't know. I'm pleased because through my work, I can help my neighbors."

Pascuala Rosario Guarchaj, COLRED member, Xesac Abaj hamlet.

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Introduction

This case study presents the experience of the community work that was done since the introduction of the gender equality perspective within the framework of the Partners for Resilience program in 10 rural communities¹ of Guatemala, in accordance with the programmatic strategy of CARE Guatemala and CARE LAC Strategy for 2020, in which the empowerment of rural indigenous women is one of the prioritized approaches.

The size of the population of these communities is an estimated 2,863 persons, all of whom are 100% of Maya K'iché descent; 48% are women. The populated centers and productive areas are exposed to a variety of hazards due to extreme tectonic, geodynamic, and hydro-climatologic events², which in the past have caused the loss of lives, damage to livelihoods and productive infrastructure, and economic losses, and have led to incidents of food scarcity. (Government of Guatemala and others, 2010 and 2014). The population depends on subsistence agriculture for their livelihoods. The division of labor by gender is characterized by a high participation of women in domestic reproductive tasks and their low participation in decision-making structures at community level.

Concordant with the Climate Vulnerability and Capacity Analysis (CVCA) methodology that was applied to implement the integrated approach of Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR), Climate Change Adaptation (CCA) and Ecosystem Management and Restoration (MRE – together DRR/CCA/MRE), CARE and Asociación Vivamos Mejor helped to identify and analyze the participation of women in risk management in 10 communities. This was done through dialogue and mixed group reflection in groups consisting of both men and women. The strengths and weaknesses of the women in risk management were identified and recognized, valuing their participation and their capacities to contribute to the prevention of and the confrontation with the consequences of climate change; addressing how the needs of both women and men should be attended to in different ways, as well as how they proposed their own participation in the institutional system of local decision-making for risk reduction should take shape.

1. Pasaquiyup, Tzamabaj, Paquip, Chicorral of the municipality of Santa Catarina Ixtahuacán; and Tzamabaj, Pacanal II, Chuituj, Xezacabaj, Pasaquiyup and Pak'im in the jurisdiction of the municipality of Nahualá of the department of Sololá

2. These communities suffered the impacts of Hurricane Mitch (1998), Tropical Storm Stan (2005), Tropical Storm Agatha both in 2010, and Tropical Depression E12 (2011), among others.

Acknowledging skills and vulnerabilities, and strengthening women's capacities in disaster risk reduction

The social vulnerability of women in the 10 communities is mainly rooted in the disadvantage of a socially assigned role, which is mainly centered on in domestic reproductive work of taking care of the children and attending household chores. Therefore their opportunities to actively participate in and make decisions concerning the family and the community are limited. This situation was pointed out by the women during the participatory process³ of risk analysis and the formulation of response plans.

The needs put forward by the women focused on the lack of information concerning how to behave in case of a risk, because if they identified one, the women did not have the appropriate and opportune information to face it; so they depended entirely on the decisions of men in order to act. The awareness raising and training process provided the women with sufficient information on risks and possible measures to prevent and manage them, and also with ideas how to actively participate and how to contribute to the improvement of the conditions for risk management for the entire community.



The capacities of women to manage risks in the communities were identified and acknowledged by the women as well as the men; those capabilities mainly consisted of particular knowledge that the women had of each member of their family, of the characteristics of the houses and immediate surroundings, what the

potential impacts to their houses might be⁴ and how the scarce domestic resources are administered both in normal situations and in case of an emergency. Additionally, women's capacities were revalued regarding providing (health) care to the families. In their role as midwives and community health providers, their capacities to cultivate and use medicinal plants and their creativity for the protection, use and management of the natural surroundings was similarly revalued.

Nevertheless, institutional weakness on both national and local level, general poverty of the region, the subsistence economy of the communities, and recurring impacts of natural hazards in this territory, all hinder the capacities of women and demand extraordinary efforts of the entire community, which were identified and formulated in the response plans.

Facilitating the participation of women in community organization to reduce disaster risks

Once in ten communities the risks to which the communities were exposed were identified, Local Coordinators for Disaster Reduction (COLRED) were set up, as established in the norms, protocols and procedures of the National Coordinator for Disaster Reduction (CONRED), with the inclusion of women that on average represented 31% of its members.

"... Manuela participated well in the COLRED. She has the support of the community and collaborates in the community. As she is a teacher, she has other ideas. She has given trainings, takes minutes, handles requests and is collaborating a lot. Before, no woman worked like Manuela, the community is thankful to her" **Antonio Tsaput Mas, COLRED coordinator and COCODE President, Pak'im hamlet, Nahualá⁵.**

3. The CVCA methodology applied and considered the factors that influence in resilience (See: Toward Resilience: A Guide to Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change Adaptation. Marilise Turnbull, Charlotte L. Stierrett and Amy Hilleboe 2013).

4. This information was shared by the women in meeting spaces culturally reserved only to them; and in Tz'amabaj hamlet, Nahualá, their contributions were so valuable that the risk identification process was led by women of the community.

5. COCODE is the entity of participation installed by the Law on Development Councils for the community level



To make the women’s participation and their access to information visible, communication opportunities were specifically dedicated to women with each of the COLRED. For example, the Community Festival “Women and their Contribution in Reduction of Disaster Risks in the Community” was organized in which 926 adult women and 248 men participated, amongst whom members of the COLREDS and Community Development Councils (COCODE) of the ten involved communities.

In order to create and maintain an environment of trust between women and men that facilitated dialogue and exchange of experiences in risk management, CARE applied training techniques and tools developed by the education modules of the Partners for Resilience program, which are part of the National Base Curriculum of the Ministry of Public Education and implemented in the schools⁶. The addressed themes were the basic concepts of disaster risk reduction from the perspectives of prevention, preparation, management and response.

Considering gender in community analysis and planning

Within the context of the Partners for Resilience program, CARE and Asociación Vivamos Mejor promoted a widely participatory process, incorporating the gender equality approach to analyze the risks that communities, their women, men, girls and boys are exposed to. Risk maps or “croquis” of each of the communities were drawn; women participated actively, contributed sufficient key information of quality, based on which the community risk manage-

ment plans were elaborated. planes comunitarios de gestión de riesgos.

After organizing the COLRED, the elaboration of **Local Response Plans** was promoted in each of the 10 communities. The Plans identified and distinguished the needs and capacities of the women and men; they defined actions differentiating according to the diagnostics and risk analyses. The joint responsibility of the work concerning preparation and emergency response was defined as a basic principle to allow for the participation of women in conditions equal to those of men.

“...here in our community we see our own need; in the community men and women have the same rights. For example, in our community we take care of people who are the neediest and us women, we have different ideas, we will unite so that we can do this.”

**María Mas,
First Aid Commission, COLRED, Pak’im
hamlet**

In the Local Response Plans, the communities defined the actions for which women are responsible in case of emergencies:

- Managing information
- Providing first aid
- Attending to the shelters, and
- Handling humanitarian aid.

6. See P/R Case Study *Fostering a culture of resilience in the youth: Methodological Support Modules for teachers.* <http://lac.wellands.org/moduloseducativos>

To mitigate the impacts and conserve the ecosystems, the actions developed by women were acknowledged and their contributions to natural resource conservation were valued; for example: the collection of seedlings to construct live barriers and the stabilization of slopes, as well as structures for the production of grenadines [fruit], an alternative income source for women and their families.

The revaluation and recuperation of traditional agricultural knowledge

Within the context of the Partners for Resilience program, CARE, Wetlands International and Vivamos Mejor conducted a study on the agricultural biodiversity of the region. The study compiled the species, productive systems and local cultivation practices, and put their results into practice through the establishing of orchards in 10 schools.



The schools orchards were set up with the participation of the parents who worked the earth and taught the girls and boys the best practices to do so. The mothers and grandmothers identified the plants by their medicinal and edible properties, how they are useful to the community and taught them how to sow and take care of them. Subsequently, the teachers, girls and boys took care of the orchards.

“We feel good. We believe that we helped out. Not only men worked, we also worked there.”
Pascuala Hilaria Guarchaj Tum, 12 years old, Paquip hamlet’s school

Moreover, benefiting from the women’s knowledge, this experience served to demonstrate in practice the possibilities of livelihood diversification and with it to strengthen resilience related to food security and healthcare of the people. Also, it aided the recuperation of ancestral knowledge on native edible and medicinal plants, and to revalue their use in the face of external consumption tendencies. It mainly served to strengthen the relations between teachers, mothers, grandmothers and girls and boys.

“We sow these plants because they serve us. I have a grandmother who knows these plants and she explained them to me. So I told my colleagues what they are and what their use is. I think that if a boy or a girl or woman or man gets sick, I believe that these plants can cure them. When I will be a teacher, I’ll explain to the boys so that they know these exist.”
Pascuala Hilaria Guarchaj Tum, 12 years old, Paquip hamlet’s school.

Results

The Partners for Resilience and their members CARE and Asociación Vivamos Mejor achieved the inclusion of 31% of women in the 10 Local Coordinators for Disaster Reduction (COLRED), through awareness raising activities about the different roles of women and men, and the revaluation of the roles of women within the communities in the risk management processes; also, they facilitated the participation of girls in the School Committee for Risk Reduction Management.

The participation of women and girls in these areas, which was promoted as part of a strategic interest in gender, increased the self-esteem of the women, according to their testimonies. Furthermore, the conditions were provided to expand their participation in other communal spaces of decision-making, such as the Community Municipality and Community Development Council (COCODE).

The process of strengthening local capacities facilitated the women to identify and interpret the risks that they, their families and community were exposed to. This allowed them to acquire the capacities for decision-making concerning early-response actions.

In the Xolcajá sector of the Pak'im hamlet, which lies the farthest away, the women learned that after one or two days of heavy rain, the boys and girls should not go to school. This is based on their observation of occurred risks in the past and interpreted during community risk mappings. These risks consist of landslides and the flooding of two creeks that the children need to cross on their way to school.

Utilizing the areas for communication, information and coordination, advancements were made in the acknowledgement by the men for the work that women had done. The men had always been of the opinion that women added to their work load during emergencies and/or disasters, because their care tasks for their families increased, and the conditions to fulfill the household chores altered. For example, if a water system is ruined, women needed to walk farther to collect the water necessary for domestic use.

The acknowledgement from the community leaders of women's contributions to the strengthening of community resilience has made it possible for women to express themselves more freely and with more trust in the community assemblies. The trainings have accomplished that women have gained knowledge about the risk management theme, which augments their participation and opinion in all work meetings of COLRED.

Lessons learned

- **Each project or action must start with an analysis of the situation of women of the community**, especially if said action is aimed at the active participation of people. This information is key to knowing the local dynamics between women and men, as well as to developing an adequate strategy to stimulate the active participation of women.
- To raise the awareness of women and men on the various communal areas of decision-making, **first an outline must be drawn up on the ideas and prejudices of the community on the roles and responsibilities of gender and their implications in daily life**, local proposals to reevaluate these roles and to balance the domestic work and community work must be made, and finally the benefits that will come about after making these changes. Also, it is important to build compromises between the leaders of both genders.
- **Constant guidance by experienced personnel is required when working in rural communities to develop the**

capacity for risk management; this being either to prevent, mitigate or respond. This personnel must apply methodologies and participatory pedagogical techniques for community work, to speak the local language and to be sensitive to the socio-cultural context, in order to fulfill activities without damaging.

- **It is imperative that the entire field team has had at least basic formation in gender equality**, to be certain that the gender perspective is incorporated into the management of disaster risk reduction in the communities. This includes working on a gender action plan with concrete results that are incorporated into the operational plan of the project and foresee close guidance of a specialist on the theme that can advise at specific points of time during implementation.
- **It is fundamental to work a project cycle from the gender perspective to address the different needs and capacities of women and men**, in order to identify their potential contributions in emergency situations and/or disasters. Also it is important to include an awareness raising program in the project for all the actors, to highlight the importance of the gender equality perspective in development. This applies to adults, women and men, girls and boys.
- In rural contexts, where formal education is limited for both men and women, and where a high percentage of women is illiterate, **seeking alternative formation methods increases the self-esteem of women and their general knowledge**, thereby increasing their opportunity to become a member of a community organization and to actively contribute to local development. In this process it is important to identify a woman with major leadership abilities to encourage the development of other skills in her peers, which allow them to form part of decision-making structures in communal and public spaces in the future.

- **To promote and institutionalize gender equality, it is necessary to build and maintain a close relationship of long-lasting trust with all members of the community** to ensure the equal participation of women, because this requires a change of attitudes and social behavior. The support of women by municipal mechanisms will also be required, such as the Municipal Offices for Women or the Commission for Women in the National System of Development Councils.



Advancing towards the future, in the opinion of a woman community leader

María Mas, community leader of Pak'im hamlet, believes, now she has been working with the project, that positive activities can be developed, directed specifically at women and with the participation of men, to improve the women's knowledge of their rights. It is important to emphasize that their participation does not depend on the presence or absence of men, but in fact is a right inherent to being a person.

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