

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: THE PHILIPPINES

When a tropical storm and heavy rains cause flooding that affects 4 million people, as happened in August 2012, the role disaster risk reduction plays to limit the devastation might be overlooked. In the midst of this widespread disaster, however, communities have been making important progress to reduce threats from natural hazards. Their drive deserves recognition and continued support.

Zooming in on the town of Mabitac in Laguna Province, one finds nearly 2,500 families living in an area that floods at least six times a year. Here, and in four other provinces in the Philippines, financial and technical support from USAID has enabled Philippine communities to lessen the risk, frequency, and severity of floods and to prepare to manage flood emergencies better when they occur.

In the past, flooding was made worse by tons of garbage carelessly thrown away, clogging gutters and waterways. Turning this problem into an opportunity, the municipality entered into a partnership with USAID, the U.N. World Food Program, and others in 2011 to manage waste more strategically. First, residents cleaned up the rivers, canals, and other waterways to facilitate the flow of water. Next, local officials built a facility to reduce waste through recycling and composting and to dispose properly of any remaining garbage.

The initiative quickly attracted participation from an estimated 90 percent of the town’s population. Enterprising community organizations soon turned organic waste into fertilizer and recycled plastic and paper into goods such as bags, aprons, building supplies, and paper briquettes. Due in part to improved waste management practices, three area villages had reported reduced inundation throughout the first half of 2012, and, when major flooding began in August, the water level was much lower than during previous floods.

Since the threat of flooding will not be completely eliminated in Mabitac, residents have also prepared themselves for an eventual emergency. USAID has provided funding to the U.S. Forest Service, the U.N. World Food Program, and partners in the Philippines’ government and civil society to help the town create flood contingency plans, improve emergency management practices, and train and equip first responders, including a highly specialized rescue team.

During the most severe part of the August 2012 flooding, Mabitac activated its newly established incident management team. The team opened an emergency operations center, coordinated assistance, and used radios and social media to share advisories and information with the community. Meanwhile, the fire department—which had also received USAID-supported training—monitored flood conditions, worked to evacuate neighborhoods, and conducted rescues using USAID-provided life jackets. No casualties due to flooding occurred in Mabitac.

Although floods are likely to reoccur during the Philippines’ annual rainy season, the town of Mabitac is an example of how timely, concerted efforts can turn a potentially life-altering disaster into a foreseeable challenge that prepared, resilient citizens can withstand and move beyond more quickly.



Trash from Mabitac is now processed through a facility that recycles and composts waste. Proper disposal of garbage is essential for keeping surrounding waterways free of clogs.



The Mabitac incident management team managed the August 2012 flood response effectively.



A USAID-provided and locally made fiberglass rescue boat was on stand-by to assist with rescues in Mabitac in August 2012. All photos are courtesy of the U.N. World Food Program.