

An Inside Story on Relief Work in Peru

By Jacob Goad

When community groups were scrambling to help victims of the 8.0 earthquake on Peruvian coast, I was involved with many people who were trying to wrap their minds around relief plans. I heard conversations quickly evolve from search and rescue, medical supplies, food and water, and blankets to counseling, access, safe housing, water sources, livelihood, and sewage solutions.

During a disaster you learn fast. It seems like life kicks the turbo switch and you hang on with all of you've got. What you see makes you a different person, and what you do, it's never enough.

In Peru, rural towns were mostly abandoned after the earthquake. When ACT¹ arrived in San Benito, Chincha, my colleagues were surprised to find a little boy who didn't own a pair of shoes. He walked around in the cold rubble of the pueblo and stretched out his hand to me and said, "Do you want to look for fruit with me?"

In addition to making poverty and inequality worse, the earthquake opened the public eye to populations that were already vulnerable before the earthquake hit. One of my former professors, Tanya Golash-Boza, sociology professor at the University of Kansas, has been studying Afro-Peruvian populations commented on rural-urban distinctions in Peru: "These (rural-urban) distinctions are racialized in Peru, to the extent that indigenous people who migrate to cities are a little further up the racial hierarchy than those who stay in the rural areas."

"It is true that most of the media outlets did not mention that Afro-Peruvians were disproportionately victims of this earthquake, and ... the legacy of slavery and structural racism worsened the plight of the victims of the earthquake. At the same time, the history of colonialism and forced indigenous labor in Peru has exacerbated indigenous poverty in Peru."

Temporary Housing

In the days following the earthquake many organizations, including ACT, began giving workshops on temporary housing. Most all temporary shelters use a cubic wood frame. These frames can be covered with a variety of materials such as thatch or plastic. Plastic is quite hot in the summer and offers no ventilation.

Houses

As permanent construction begins, people are thinking prevention. Many families live in adobe houses throughout South America. Adobe brick structures are not as stable as concrete and mortar. The complication is that stronger materials cost more.

As many rural people think about rebuilding, they are saying, "What do I build with? I don't want adobe anymore, but that's all I can afford." ACT is promoting wooden structures in Chincha because wood is earthquake resistant, and the temperatures are mild.

The Peruvian government plans to allocate just under \$2000 to each household for rebuilding.

¹ Action by Churches Together, Action group for the World Council of Churches

The government requires land and property deeds to help people obtain help, but many squatters, the most vulnerable and poor, do not have titles. Some land was passed down and there are no legal documents to certify who the owner is.

ACT Peru is working in several communities to help families with these legal matters and reconstruction.

Bathrooms, Waste, and Water Sources

One of the key issues after a natural disaster is to make sure that people have a sanitary place to use the restroom.

ACT Peru is focusing on making sure that fecal matter doesn't cause the outbreak of epidemics. The solution is composting toilets, which do not require water or sewer systems. These toilets are sustainable in areas with water shortages, like San Benito.

In the desert of Peru, the water comes from the Andes Mountains run off, which comes from the glaciers. The effects of global warming are causing the glaciers to melt away at a high rate in Peru and Bolivia. People in the low desert regions who grow grapes rely on that water for irrigation. This has created a water deficiency for people living in the Andes. As a result there is an interregional conflict between the coastal and mountain regions of Peru.

ACT Peru wants to work sustainably to provide water for the people in need, but doesn't want to further interregional conflict. In that sense, ACT is working in both regions (mountain and coastal) to equip people to rebuild their communities.

Uruguayan Psychologist Contributes

ACT brought a Uruguayan psychologist who traveled from Sweden to Peru to give specialized training sessions to Peruvian psychologist and social workers working in the disaster area. The Uruguayan psychologist had spent ample time in Pakistan training community groups after the earthquake in 2005.

ACT is planning to send a team of child and family psychologists to work in San Benito, Chíncha, Ica, Pisco and Huancavelica.