

Sin Borda ... No Hay Comida

by
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The title of this article (“Without retaining dikes, there’s no food”) has become the rallying cry for thousands of families – many of them active Lutherans – who live along a 10 kilometer stretch of the Paz River in the southwest corner of El Salvador.

Ten straight days of torrential rains in Oct. 2011 caused widespread flooding and massive crop & livestock losses throughout Central America. El Salvador was the country that suffered most. Of its 262 municipalities, few suffered more than the population of San Francisco Menendez (also known as Cara Sucia) where dozens of rural villages were inundated when the Paz River overflowed its banks.



Civil Protection Committee in *El Castaño* (Nov. 2011)

On my first visit to El Salvador after the flood waters receded (in Nov. 2011), I was invited by the local Lutheran pastor to visit *El Castaño*, one of the many villages that was totally cut off when its only access road

literally disappeared under several feet of water.

During that visit to *El Castaño*, I heard moving first-hand accounts of how the over 300 families of this peasant farm community lived in makeshift shelters for nearly two weeks with virtually no outside assistance, thanks to a well-trained Civil Protection Committee (all volunteers) and the willingness of community residents to share food & whatever other provisions they had with their neighbors. No home escaped the flooding and the damage to crops was near-total. ***But no lives were lost.***



Community leader inspects flood damage on the Salvadoran side of the Paz River (Nov. 2011)

Several leaders from *El Castaño* took me to the banks of the Paz River to see the principal cause of a recurring problem that dates back to Hurricane Mitch in 1998.

Each year, flooding occurs due to the lack of a system of retaining dikes at key points along the Paz River – which serves as the border between El Salvador and Guatemala. The consequences are predictable and often tragic: destruction of crops, homes, roads,

bridges, farm animals and even the loss of human life.

On that first walk along the Salvadoran side of the Paz River, I also heard about ADICO for the first time. ADICO stands for the **Inter-Community Association for the Development of Southern Ahuachapan**. It is a community-based advocacy organization that works on behalf of 24 communities.

With active encouragement and support from the Salvadoran Lutheran Church, ADICO was formed to exert community pressure on Salvadoran authorities to construct a system of retaining dikes that would avoid flooding on the scale of what occurred during Hurricane Mitch.

For more than a decade, those pleas fell on deaf ears. But the catastrophic losses caused by last year's rains and flooding convinced church & community leaders to try again. As ADICO leaders put it, ***"We are tired of being treated as victims; tired of being the recipients of charity . . . we want to be listened to."***

The skeptics abounded – among them local government officials – given the formidable cost of constructing a system of retaining dikes. But subsequent events have proved them wrong.

When I returned to El Salvador in March 2012, ADICO's advocacy efforts were already bearing fruit. In three months time, they had convinced El Salvador's Human Rights Ombudsman to take up their cause by convening & chairing an Inter-Agency Roundtable on the Paz River problem.

An initial agreement was reached to undertake a dredging operation – not as a permanent solution but rather a short-term

measure to mitigate the annual flooding that occurs during a "normal" rainy season in this part of El Salvador.

I was able to accompany ADICO and Lutheran church leaders to one of these inter-agency meetings where plans were finalized for the expenditure of approximately \$230,000 in public funds for this dredging operation. For poor communities whose needs historically have been ignored by government officials, extracting a financial commitment of this magnitude was no small achievement.



ADICO leaders outside the Human Rights Ombudsman's office in San Salvador (March 2012)

In Aug. 2012, I was able to visit the Paz River for the 3rd time since the October 2011 floods. The progress was evident.

The dredging operation – agreed to back in March – is largely complete in 3 strategic points along the Paz River. Beyond the original budget approved for this project, an additional \$100,000 in government funds has been made available to complete the task.

But the larger challenge lies ahead – that of identifying a more permanent solution to the annual cycle of flooding along the Paz River which will require a multi-million dollar investment.



A team of engineering experts has been assembled to identify the most appropriate course of action and to determine its cost. Their work isn't being conducted behind closed doors. Rather, community leaders are actively participating in the process through ADICO, accompanied by the local Lutheran pastor and lay leaders.

The unfolding story in Cara Sucia is noteworthy for a number of reasons. It's an inspiring example of what can happen when poor communities organize themselves to work for a common cause – and not just one community, but dozens!

It also demonstrates the progress that can be made when political leaders finally listen to the local population and work with them to resolve a life-threatening situation, rather than ignoring their problems – especially if they're poor – until the next election campaign comes around.

For me, however, the heart of the story is the steadfast faith of the people involved.

Church & community leaders alike believe in a God who is truly present in their struggles. That faith motivated a handful of people to commit themselves to an ambitious plan of advocacy which initially was considered “crazy” by many of their neighbors.

When they become tired & discouraged, they return to the Biblical passage that originally inspired them to take up this cause. It's the passage from Luke's gospel about what Christ expects of his disciples (Lc 9:57-62), in particular v. 62 which talks about putting your hand to the plow and not looking back.

I would venture to say that Christ has assembled a rather remarkable group of disciples in Cara Sucia. Their numbers and influence are growing, principally because their work bears witness to a God who hears and heeds the cries of the poor.



ADICO president Maria Alicia Rivas and Lutheran pastor Jorge Henriquez (Aug. 2012)

Thanks be to God for the dedication of ADICO and Lutheran church leaders as they work to bring a measure of peace and stability to the lives and livelihoods of everyone living in this part of El Salvador.

Thanks be to God also for the opportunities we have to accompany them through our prayers, visits & offerings!