

## Story of survival – VALERIANO (El Salvador)



Photo: Gonzalo Bell

### **At a glance**

**Problem caused by climate change:**  
Flooding.

**SCIAF partner:** CESTA.

### **Solution:**

- Construction of a community 'safe house' which acts as a refuge during flooding
- Emergency rescue/evacuation team set up
- Warning system established to monitor river levels.

### **Outcome:**

The community is now better prepared for future disasters.

### **Introduction**

The people in Valeriano's community settled in the area following their displacement during the civil war in El Salvador in the 1980s. Climate change has been making life very difficult for the community. Both flooding and drought have meant that people have lost their animals and crops.

CESTA (SCIAF's partner in El Salvador) has been helping Valeriano's community deal with the impact of climate change.

### **How CESTA has helped Valeriano's community**

- A communal safe house has been constructed. It sits two metres above ground and acts as a refuge for 250 people during floods.
- Training and equipment has been provided to monitor river levels and set up a communication system to warn the community when river levels are dangerous.
- Training has been provided to enable families to produce medicines and soaps from locally available plants.

## **Quotes**

*“Climate change in this country makes things complicated because sometimes we get flooded, and all life is drowned by the water. After that, we suffer a period of drought. Therefore it’s difficult to know what to do to cope with the situation.”*

*“September and October are the hardest for us as we need to be really alert. Our people have their suitcases packed just in case they need to grab them and evacuate quickly.”*

*“I would be delighted to make a call for the governments of Scotland, England, France, China and all the most developed countries to ask them to consider their behaviour; to ask them to save our planet because they are destroying it.”*

*“We believe that we still have time to do something. We should educate adults and children about the importance of trees and how long it takes for a tree to grow.”*

## **Transcript of interview with Valeriano**

Sixteen years ago there was a war here; a very terrible war that covered the whole country. We were not natives from this area; we are natives from the north of the country, like most people from these communities.

From here, we started our own lives in the countryside and we noticed that this soil, this land, is very good for agricultural use. However, the climate change we are suffering is depleting it.

To give you an example, behind us we have the river Poniente which is half a kilometer wide. In winter, when the hydroelectric reservoirs discharge water, the river overflows and floods our communities. When Hurricane Mitch occurred the water reached over the 2 metre mark – exactly in the same place where we are now.

I know you are not going to believe me but we were travelling by boat on that same road you were driving – not by car, but by motorboat, during the Mitch aftermath.

We have tried to find a way to organise ourselves to respond to these problems and each year that a natural disaster hits us it leaves us with more experience. And this is the way that we have been organising our communities.

Hurricane Mitch affected most Central American countries. We were seriously affected as we lost all our crops: the whole production was flooded and lost. Most of our cattle also drowned.

After Mitch, we had lots of epidemics as a result of the flooding that rendered our latrines and sanitary services unserviceable and exposed. After that, life was really difficult for us.

We started to study from a community perspective what we were going to do to solve our problems. CESTA started supporting us and we still work together.

We created communal committees to organise young people and schools. We organised prevention committees for each community (29 communities in the area) and educated the community organisations to be alert and defend themselves.

We have a communal house which sits two and a half metres above ground level and acts as a refuge during times of flooding.

We have also organised a commando team, financed by *Comunidades Unidas*, who bought us a motor boat and an off-road vehicle. The commando team supports 29 communities during emergency situations.

### **How does climate change affect you?**

The river floods us often: our animals drown, our crops are destroyed and we need to start all over again.

One year we prepared the land and we cultivated. Then just after sowing, winter came and we had no rain at all. That drought affected us very seriously as all our crops died.

Next season we waited for the rain; we cultivated and sowed and when the plants were big and beautiful, the river flooded us and killed everything. Those extreme phenomena are the ones that affect us most.

We have worked hard to look for alternatives in such an environment. First, many families were successful in cultivating during the summer although not all the families have the capacity or the possibility of doing that.

### **Why are only some families able to cultivate during the summer?**

That is because during the summer there is a lot of work to be done. You need to wait for the right time. Just after the rains stop you need to plough the land to prepare it. And you also need to inject money into such an activity. You have to use a tractor a few times on the land to chop it then make furrows and sow the seeds. This costs a lot of money and not every family can afford it.

We have worked with many families to find them alternatives. Some are now sowing different vegetables, others are growing fruit trees. We expect that within five years we will all be producing enough to sell to the market so we can earn an income.

Other ways for us to subsist are rearing cattle, buying corn and preparing the pastures for animals.

Climate change in this country makes things complicated because sometimes we get flooded and all life is drowned by the water. After that we suffer a period of drought. Therefore it's difficult to know what to do to cope with the situation.

**How do you feel waiting for a disaster to happen?**

At the beginning, people had difficulties coping with the situation. Afterwards, people started to get used to these changes and started to look for different mechanisms to cope.

We organised the communities ourselves. We attended demonstrations to ask the government for a dam. We were able to stop flooding last year with the dam that is now in place.

What the community has done is to organise themselves and go and claim for our rights to the government because the government has obligations to act. That's why we are paying taxes – so the people can get something in return. That's how development works.

Also, if you look also around you would have also noticed *drenos* (flooding prevention structures) that we are restoring.

**How do you feel about the impact climate change is having on your community?**

September and October are hardest for us, as we need to be really alert. Our people have their suitcases packed just in case they need to grab them and evacuate quickly.

There are some regions that are more vulnerable to climate change than others. We reckon that Central America is one of the most vulnerable regions.

The big transnational companies; those producing oil or operating factories in industrialised countries are the ones directly affecting our planet Earth. The North Pole is melting because of chemicals and gases from the transnational companies that keep growing and expanding their businesses.

Industrialised countries keep fuelling the growth of their own industries and multinationals and nobody is reminding them that the poor countries such as ours are the ones that are going to suffer the impact of their actions.

The bottom line here is that we are poor because there are many, many people who are not able to produce; who are not able to develop, who are marginalised.

Environmental conditions could be improved if wealthy countries were able to stop their current behaviour; stop their contamination and exploitation of the forest areas. But if they continue with their harmful behaviour, we receive the impact. That for us is like a death threat.

**Is it important for people in Scotland to know about the impact of climate change in El Salvador?**

I would call on the governments of Scotland, England, France, China and all the most developed countries to consider their behaviour; to ask them to save our planet because they are destroying it.

We believe we still have time to do something. We should educate adults and children about the importance of trees and how long it takes for a tree to grow.

There is place for each of us on this planet. We can all live together. We can all work together to achieve something.