

Feature Project: Catholic Relief Services (CRS)

School: Lacandon, Baja Verapaz, Guatemala

Through the MWA's SWASH+ Central America program, CRS has worked with local partner Caritas Verapaz, community leaders, and local governmental officials to improve water and sanitation conditions in the Lacandon school and provide training on the importance of good hygiene habits. The project included:

- Construction of an elevated water storage tank at the school
- Construction of a handwashing station at the school
- Construction of dry, composting toilets at the school
- Introduction of two new water treatment methods at the school and in the wider community
- Hygiene methodology training for teachers
- Hygiene education for parents and students

SWASH+, Healthy Schools, and Healthy Communities in

By Mark Duey, SWASH+ Central America Program Coordinator.



A trip to the restroom at a typical, rural school in Guatemala is an experience to forget. Many schools have no access to water. Others have no toilets. Those that do are often in such poor conditions that the children seek nearby houses or fields to take care of their necessities. Families in Lacandon, Baja Verapaz, have historically had access to water, but it is contaminated and is not enough to meet their basic needs. Lacandon has one of many “unofficial” schools in Guatemala, supported only partially by government funding, often leaving communities already lacking basic resources with no opportunity to provide an environment conducive to learning in their schools.



CRS Guatemala, through the School Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene Plus Community Impact (SWASH+) Central America program of the Millennium Water Alliance (MWA), has helped students in Lacandon and other communities be able to enjoy improved access to sufficient, safe water to meet their needs, and also nice, new restroom facilities. The program, which is partially funded by the Global Water Challenge, targets 148 schools in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua.

CRS Guatemala’s local partner for the program, Caritas Verapaz, has been helping families in the municipalities of Rabinal and Cubulco to understand the importance of safe water and to learn new water treatment methods such as solar disinfection and household ceramic filters with silver–colloid liners which remove contaminants. “These methods are introduced in the schools through the SWASH+ program, at the same time they are introduced at the household-level in conjunction with a broader community-focused program throughout the watershed,” explained Adan Pocasangre, SWASH+ Coordinator for CRS Guatemala.



Caritas has also facilitated the critical process of coordination with the local municipal government,

school district offices, and community committees to ensure project sustainability. “We’ve adopted a joint-strategy for implementation of SWASH+ in Baja Verapaz,” said Mario Arevalo, General Manager of Caritas Verapaz. “If we simply construct things for the communities on our own, project sustainability is not achieved.”

In Lacandon, in part because of the overall water shortage in the area, the school director and PTA decided to build dry, composting toilets which do not require water. “For years now we’ve had a shortage of water in our community,” said teacher Vicente Rodriguez. “The new tank allows us to have water throughout the school day but we know there’s not enough to waste.” This is part of the overall concept of “ecological sanitation,” which will provide local families with some additional fertilizer for years to come. Ecological sanitation aims to offer economically and ecologically sustainable and culturally acceptable systems that close the natural nutrient and water cycle.



CRS and Caritas have also supported an innovative method of providing local teachers with new skills for teaching hygiene and other preventative health topics in the classrooms. Teachers have enjoyed a series of “eco-rally” events, where rather than the traditional seminar format of a facilitator, a meeting room, and coffee, teachers participate in a day hike through a local cloud-forest nature reserve with stops at stations along the trail for refreshers on subjects such as water treatment methods, dental health and hygiene, and proper handwashing. “It’s a nice break from the routine and a great way to motivate the teachers to engage the students in the classroom on these topics we might not otherwise cover,” said Vicente.



Thanks to the support of CRS and Caritas through the MWA’s SWASH + program, the students at the Lacandon school should enjoy access to safe water and clean, environmentally-friendly restrooms for years to come. Expectations of adequate water and sanitation conditions are changing, hygiene habits will

improve over time, and a visit to the restroom at the school is no longer such an unpleasant experience.