



FIGHTING DISEASE TO THE LAST HOUSE ON THE HIGHEST HILL

In the shantytowns that have sprung up outside Lima, Peru, residents have strong allies against epidemics.

BY ELIZABETH STEVENS | SUMMER 2017

In the community of El Roble not far from Lima, Peru, clean water running from a tap is an almost unimaginable luxury. Here, residents—many of them migrants from poor regions of the country—haul 20-liter buckets up a steep, gravelly mountain to their makeshift houses.

“By the time you reach your house, you are dead,” said resident Maria Valdivieso.

And you are poorer than before: water here costs residents at least five times what they would pay in the city of Lima.

What’s more, once you’ve poured the water into storage barrels in your home, it becomes a health risk to your family, as standing water is the perfect breeding ground for mosquitoes that carry dangerous diseases like dengue and Zika.

That’s where Oxfam partner PREDES comes in. PREDES, the Center for the Study and Prevention of Disasters, has been working with Peru’s Ministry of Health to provide training, funds, and supplies for local health promoters in vulnerable communities like El Roble to help residents ward off outbreaks of mosquito-borne disease. Meanwhile, PREDES is urging the Lima authorities to provide running water to informal settlements like this one, to make them safer and more livable.

EASING THE RISKS, ONE HOUSEHOLD AT A TIME

On a dusty, windy November day in 2016, four health promoters crisscrossed the El Roble mountainside, knocking on doors and striking up conversations about mosquitoes and health with whoever was

home. They could tell their work was making a difference. “When we go house to house,” said promoter Bersi Ochavano, “we can see that people have learned about dengue, and they have confidence in their knowledge.”

You don’t stroll around this neighborhood: you climb. At times you need to use your hands to do it. But you don’t have to climb far to meet residents who are enthusiastic about the work of the health team.

“The promoters have been very useful, especially for our children,” said Mariela Estrada. “It can be hard to identify a serious illness, but when someone comes and talks to you face to face, you understand.”



Neighbor Gabriel Jiménez, who lives in a tiny home perched on a hand-built terrace, agreed. “Before the promoters worked with us, I didn’t know enough. I feel confident now that I can avoid dengue and Zika.”

But those who do get sick face a health system that is severely overstretched and underfunded: in late 2016, nurses and other health care workers went on strike—not only for better wages and benefits but also for access to basic supplies and equipment. In the areas where we were working, Oxfam and PREDES asked the district health centers what they needed most, and we provided what we could: wheelchairs and beds, and for one center, a waiting room so new patients can rest comfortably out of the sun.

MORE KNOWLEDGE, BETTER HEALTH

This PREDES public health project wrapped up at the end of March 2017, when the worst of the mosquito season is normally over, and the results were good: in the first quarter of the year, there were no cases of either disease in any of the 60 communities where the PREDES health promoters had been active.

When unusually heavy El Niño rains arrived soon afterward, putting communities at renewed risk of mosquito-borne disease, Oxfam partners again sprang into action to protect public health.



ABOVE: Maria Valdivieso carries a bucket of water up the mountain to her house. Thanks to the work of the health promoters, she is alert to the risks of mosquito-borne disease and keeps her storage barrel covered. “We worry for our children about dengue and Zika,” she said, “but now we have more information, so we can recognize symptoms, and we know more about prevention.” Elizabeth Stevens/Oxfam America

When agencies like PREDES join forces with communities and the government, it can be a powerful collaboration that saves lives when disasters strike. But all too often, local groups and government agencies fall desperately short of funds before their work is done. Oxfam is advocating around the world for more investment in local humanitarian leaders—in the people and organizations who are the first to act in emergencies and who so often, like the rugged health promoters of El Roble, show commitment that’s above and beyond.

As health promoter Jenny Ochavano (Bersi’s sister) gathered up her gear at the end of her workday, she said what any close observer already knew to be true: “To combat diseases like dengue, I will climb to the last house on the highest hill.”



PHOTO: ELIZABETH STEVENS/OXFAM AMERICA

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Oxfam is working with local partners to respond to emergencies. A key focus for us is helping shift power and resources into the hands of dedicated local leaders, wherever possible, to create a faster and more sustainable system of humanitarian response.

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OXFAM

OXFAM AMERICA
226 CAUSEWAY STREET, 5TH FLOOR
BOSTON, MA 02114-2206
(877) 77-OXFAM
oxfamamerica.org

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