

Helping Mexican communities cope with floods

A case study of the Zurich's Flood Resilience Program in the region of Tabasco



Crossing the river in Jonuta, Tabasco, Mexico

Overview Zurich Flood Resilience Program

Zurich's flood resilience program is based on a unique approach that brings together our expertise and skills, the on-the-ground presence of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and Practical Action, and knowledge of prominent academic research institutions such as the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) and the Wharton Risk Management and Decision Processes Center. To mark the anniversary of the launch of the program in March 2013, we are reporting on our current community activities in the region of Tabasco in Mexico.

A river that is both friend and foe

Zurich's flood resilience project in Mexico is starting in 2014 with 11 communities around Jonuta, a municipal seat in the state of Tabasco. Another 11 communities in the same area will be added in 2015.

Tabasco includes one of the world's largest wetlands, through which the Usumacinta river flows, offering locals good fishing, fodder for grazing cattle and horses, and a fertile soil suitable for growing maize (corn). But when the rains start, the river turns from friend to foe.

Few places are more aware of this than Constitución 1917, a small community perched on the banks of the Usumacinta reachable only by boat. As Zurich's flood experts and representatives from the Mexican Red Cross discovered when they visited the community in March 2014, the village is in danger of literally being swallowed up by the river and squeezed off the map.

As though playing cat and mouse, the Usumacinta likes to change course. It can rise as much as three meters from dry to rainy season. When its banks start to crumble, structures may completely disappear, taken by the river. People in Constitución 1917 point to the remains of what used to be a primary school until flooding took it. All that is left now is some muddy rubble. With some pride the townspeople show off a new school built only 10 meters from the banks of the Usumacinta. However, it is just a matter of time until that structure, too, is threatened.

Why not build farther from the river? The townspeople shake their heads. There is nowhere else to build. The community is squeezed between a privately-owned ranch and the river. The narrow strip of land where Constitución 1917 sits will only get smaller.

"Why don't you move (the school) farther from the river?" a member of our team asked. The answer was simple. "We can't get access to the land." The village of Constitución 1917 is squeezed between a fertile, privately-owned ranch and the river that is increasingly drawing closer.

