Sharing three years of joint work between government, civil society and private sector in Disaster Risk Reduction

19/07/2017 Last July, over 200 people gathered in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, attended a forum on the private sector’s commitment to disaster risk reduction. The participants were made up of managers from private companies, public institutions and NGOs. The forum explored the collaboration between Trócaire, the Honduran Association of Light Manufacturing (AHM), the Honduran Association of NGOs (ASONOG), the Mennonite Social Action Committee (CASM) and the Honduran Commission for Emergencies (COPECO) to improve emergency preparedness and response capacity in Northern Honduras.

This work, which started in 2014, has benefited more than 30,000 people in the cities of San Pedro Sula, Choloma and Puerto Cortés. The project has been made possible due to the support of the Disaster Preparedness ECHO (DIPECHO) programme of the European Commission’s Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid department (ECHO). The work was much needed as the Sula Valley in Honduras is the most populated area in the country, extremely vulnerable to floods and hurricanes, has huge social inequality and high crime rates. The participation of private sector was critical as the Sula Valley is the country’s economic engine, with a large light manufacturing sector. Nelson García, from CASM, talked about the project as “an example at a national and international leve of coordination between civil society organisations, public instutions and the private sector” and remembered that there are still 18,000 people living in shanty towns in the city.
During the event, the speakers from government, civil society and the private sector talked about the legal framework in Honduras for Disaster Risk Reduction, the national and regional advocacy platforms, the importance of private sector participation and the experience of the AHM. “The relationship with civil society organisations was difficult at the beginning, but I reckon that many industries don’t take this kind of initiative because of their lack of knowledge about the risks we are exposed to” AHM coordinator of the health and operational security unit, Geovani Lara, pointed out. The purpose of project was for textile factories and other business to have developed “Business Disaster Preparedness and Contingency Plans with a Social Perspective”, according to Lara. “We want to ensure that emergency plans take into account how workers’ communities are affected when an emergency is declared and in the medium term, being able to work alongside these communities to reduce existing risks and avoid creating new ones. We want the people we train to use their abilities in their communities, to be agents of change and to create resilience”.

One of the achievements of the project is having 2000 trained responders accredited by COPECO to act during emergencies in the factories. Many factories now have a workplace emergency committee registered with COPECO, with skills ranging from first aid, evacuation, to search and rescue. “The focus of corporate social responsibility should shift towards disaster risk reduction,” says Lara. “We are happy with the work we have done so far,” added Martha Benavides, Head of Technical Services and Administration at AHM, “but we still have a long way to go. Between 40 and 60% of the companies that close down during an emergency never reopen,” pointed out Marianela Guzmán, from the Coordination Centre for the Prevention of Natural Disasters in Central America (CEPREDENAC). “If the company can recover quickly from an emergency this benefits the communities where the workers live,” Lara pointed out.

The event closed with a call for the three sectors to keep working together and to bring more companies on board to replicate the good work done up to now in other sectors of the Honduran economy; in order to keep protecting people’s lives and livelihoods once the project is over. Currently, this work is being replicated in the south of Honduras and a parallel project, also funded by ECHO is being implemented in the department of Escuintla in Guatemala.