



RESHAPING LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS

Communities across Guatemala's Dry Corridor are strengthening local leadership and early warning systems to improve food security, protect their families, and prepare for the future.

BY ANA PAULA HIRANO AND MARION CABANES | FALL 2026

As the sun rises over Guatemala's Dry Corridor, Doña Brenda Guanché Manuel steps outside her small hillside home in Chixim. She pauses to gaze across the open horizon and the parched valley below before checking the rain gauge beside her veranda. She carefully records the rainfall, temperature, and humidity measurements before preparing breakfast, then makes her way down the green terraced plot where she tends maize, beans, and squash.

Once a dry, less productive patch of land, the plot now includes banana and peach trees that provide shade and fresh fruit for her three children, while chickens and a few dairy cows help diversify the family's diet. Around lunchtime, Guanché collects another set of measurements.

Farming on a dry hillside is never easy. Erosion and landslides are constant threats, making weather monitoring

essential to protecting her family and their livelihoods. In the midlands community of Xesiguan, Don Mario René Gonzalez Córdova follows a similar routine before tending his tomato greenhouse and few beehives.

For Guanché, René, and dozens of other local weather observers across the Baja Verapaz department in Guatemala, weather monitoring is now as much a part of daily life as preparing meals or working on crops. The information these weather observers collect helps communities monitor changing weather conditions, anticipate drought, and make better decisions about when to plant, fertilize, and harvest.

LEARNING TO ANTICIPATE DISASTER

Since 2017, Oxfam has worked with 48 rural communities across Guatemala and El Salvador through Acción Temprana en Centroamérica (ATECA), our regional disaster

risk reduction program. In partnership with local organizations and community leaders, we have supported communities in the Dry Corridor as they strengthen local leadership, build community-based disaster risk reduction systems, and develop networks of local weather observers.

When Oxfam and local partners began this project, our capacity and vulnerability assessment revealed that many people did not perceive drought as a disaster or a recurring climate risk; it was considered a reality they had always lived with. That reality often meant crop losses, food insecurity, and migration for families whose livelihoods depended on increasingly unpredictable rainfall.

For generations, families across Guatemala's Dry Corridor, mostly from Indigenous Achí and Chortí communities,

relied on the ancestral milpa system to grow maize, beans, and squash. It was a way of farming passed down through generations. But as El Niño and La Niña brought increasingly irregular rainfall, longer droughts, and more unpredictable seasons, what had sustained families for centuries was no longer enough on its own.

By monitoring rainfall, air temperature, soil humidity, and other climate information every day, communities are identifying risks earlier and are taking action before drought becomes disaster.

Now, nearly a decade after this work began, communities have the knowledge, confidence, and local systems to act before disaster strikes. "Thanks to the support and training we've received, leaders from the lower, middle, and upper communities [of the hillside] came together to build this network of local weather observers," says René. "Now we know how much rain falls in each community, and once we have that information, we are able to feed it directly into the early warning system."

Instead of waiting until an entire harvest is at risk, communities use locally generated weather data to guide farming decisions, and they also share information with their neighbors and with municipal authorities so they can analyze and make predictions at a district level. René has seen the difference in his own fields. "The early warning system helps us avoid losing more than we otherwise would lose," he says. "My notes told me the rainfall wasn't enough. I decided not to fertilize. My neighbor did, and when harvest time came, I harvested more than he did."

TOWARD A GREENER FUTURE

Preparedness extends far beyond disaster response. It also means protecting livelihoods, improving nutrition, and creating more opportunities for families to remain on their land.



TOP: Don Mario René Gonzalez Córdova has established a routine of taking weather measurements before tending to his tomato greenhouse and small honey operation in the midlands community of Xesiguan, Guatemala.

BOTTOM LEFT: Doña Brenda Guanché Manuel records observations from the rain gauge outside her home.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Guatemala's Dry Corridor.

Carlos Zaparolli/Oxfam

Across the 18 communities where ATECA works in Guatemala, reaching approximately 5,000 people, families are diversifying their livelihoods through home gardens, fruit trees, poultry, beekeeping, and climate-smart farming practices.

Guanché sees the impact every day on her own family. "Now we go to our garden and harvest greens, radishes, carrots, and eggs for our children," she says. "They have more balanced meals, and we grow this food with our own hands."

Together, communities, local partners, and Oxfam are showing that disaster preparedness is not only about responding

to crises. It is about creating the conditions for a greener, safer, and more resilient future before disaster strikes.

The ATECA program is one of several disaster risk reduction (DRR) initiatives underway at Oxfam, supporting rural communities in six countries in Asia and Central America.

In the next three years, we plan to support a total of 78 communities in El Salvador and Guatemala, reaching more than 46,000 people and helping communities thrive even in the face of a changing climate.



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