

## **Prevention and Management of Community Risks:**

### **Forming Student Leaders**

#### **-An experience of how a warning signal was used to educate in prevention**

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This story exalts the importance of education; the need to create a culture of prevention in risk management; and the significance of transforming the alert and the emergency into coordinated inter-institutional work. Fundamentally, it draws attention to the role of “political will” for the implementation of action lines that aim to mitigate risk and disaster factors in highly vulnerable populations, because it is not enough to write plans, regulations and / or laws, it is also required its execution.

The experience recounted here took place in the Vargas State between August 2004 and February 2005. Although the story actually begins in December 1999 with the “Vargas Tragedy”,

Vargas State is less than 30 minutes from Caracas, the capital of Venezuela. It is a long strip of territory of approximately 1497 km<sup>2</sup> that smiles with its entire coastline to the Caribbean Sea, being embraced by a mountain that extends from the south from east to west with the slopes of El Ávila hill, with its unmistakable peak (2,159 meters above sea level). next to Pico Naiguatá (2,765 masl) and Silla de Caracas (2,478 masl). It is made up of 11 parishes, with a mainly urban population, although there are rural villages of fishermen and farmers. Its main economic activity is tourism and services, where the Port of La Guaira and the Simon Bolívar International Airport stand out.

The geological, climatological and socio-economic conditions of the Vargas state have exposed it to situations of natural disasters and emergencies. In December 1999, the state suffered one of the largest flood disasters as a result of a series of mudslides and landslides and floods. After the 1812 earthquake, the Vargas Disaster is considered the worst natural disaster in the country. Due to its number of fatalities and victims, it is listed in the Guinness book. Human losses were counted in thousands, calculating that almost 75% were children, declared missing or separated from their parents. The damage was incalculable: displaced people, entire villages devastated and destruction of infrastructure (universities, hotels, clubs, health centers, shops, roads, etc.). The immense scars on the face of the mountains of El Ávila remained as testimony to this tragedy, which at seventeen years still persist.

The Unicef Volunteer Team for the socio-emotional support of victims, of which I was a part, knew that the reconstruction of Vargas, especially the moral and socio-emotional reconstruction, would be a large-scale task in the medium term. What is coming is precisely my experience of what followed the tragedy of 1999, no longer as a UNICEF volunteer, but as a Consultant for Social Programs for Boys, Girls, Adolescents and

Families of the *Fundación del Niño Vargas*, an institution attached to the Government of the Vargas State.

***For the rights of boys and girls not to be separated from their parents:  
a learning from the tragedy***

I began my duties as a Consultant in 2001. A year after the tragedy, the people of Vargas slowly recovered their morale, but the material damage was a permanent reminder. The Governor and the Unique Authority of Vargas made enormous efforts to return to Vargas its infrastructure (roads, homes, hospitals, shops, schools) as a starting point for its reconstruction. For my part, contacting with families who still had the hope of locating their missing children was a reminder that it was essential to raise awareness about the rights of children and adolescents in disaster situations. What was an additional tragedy to the natural disaster should not be repeated: the number of children who disappeared when they were separated from their parents due to improper handling of the rescue. The creation of the Ombudsman for Children and Adolescents attached to the *Fundación del Niño Vargas* was a way of honoring so many children who disappeared during the tragedy.

**Socio-emotional recovery was not keeping pace with material reconstruction**

***Three years had passed since the tragedy and the pain could not be removed  
in the way that debris was removed ...***

During a guided visit to the Control Tower of the Simón Bolívar International Airport, I saw how an Aeronautical Technician, who gave a talk to a group of schoolchildren. "emotionally broke", by a question a schoolboy. "And you worked here when the flood happened?" – It relived the bleak days of the tragedy and showed that the unhealed wounds from the losses were still present. This incident led me to raise with the authorities of the *Fundación del Niño Vargas* the need to carry out an Emotional Recovery Program in coordination with the Department of Health and the Department of Education of the Government; Several meetings were held for this purpose, but other priorities canceled this initiative.

**The challenge of building a culture of risk prevention in Varguenses**

***"They do not finish learning that they cannot be located in any terrain ... Vargas is great***

Many of the areas declared geologically high risk were once again occupied by affected families who returned because they did not adapt to the places where they had been relocated, which caused the State Firefighters to have to attend to collapse situations.

Undoubtedly, three social factors should be addressed in Vargas: educate about the rights of children and adolescents in situations of risk and emergencies; systematically support the socio-emotional strengthening of families and build a culture of risk prevention and disaster management.

I proposed to the Foundation the possibility of starting a Comprehensive Social Program that incorporated these factors, but its budgetary justification was not achieved. It was limited to some occasional talks with the Foundation's Team of Psychologists and Law Defenders, and the Vargas State Firefighters.

## **TURNING AN ALERT INTO OPPORTUNITY: VAGUADA DE VARGAS 2004-2005**

### ***Better safe than sorry***

In July 2004 some areas of Venezuela were affected by rainfall. The National Council for the Rights of Children and Adolescents created an Emergency Fund based on the Law on the National Organization for Civil Protection and Disaster Management (2001).

With the idea of opting for the mentioned fund, the *Fundación del Niño Vargas*, the State Firefighters, and the Directorate of Education and Civil Protection of the State of Vargas designed an Educational and Preventive Program in Community Risk Management that addressed the three social factors mentioned in previous paragraphs ( Rights of Children and Adolescents; Culture of Prevention, and Socio-Emotional Support of vulnerable families), in addition to considering the following programmatic criteria:

- 1.- Of an educational and preventive nature
- 2.- Comprehensive, by contemplating Technical Aspects (In charge of the Firefighters), Legal Aspects –Rights of children and adolescents- and Socio-emotional aspects (In charge of the Defenders and Psychologists of the Children's Foundation)
- 3.- Participative and co-responsible, through the Training of Student Leaders who would socialize their learning in Community Assemblies.
- 4.- Sustainable through Community Networks in Risk Management.

Because at that time the Vargas State had only been declared on a yellow alert, the Project was rejected in the first instance. After several meetings, our arguments that justified a reinterpretation of the funds were accepted and the allocation was approved.

### **Start of the Project in three communities: Catia la Mar, Macuto and Caruao.**

In October 2004 we started the Community Risk Prevention and Management Project in three of the five planned communities. We take as integration space the educational center (School or Lyceum) of greatest reference in the sector, adapting the contents to the

reality of each community. By December of that year, we had 114 people trained in community risk management, of which 62 were children and adolescents; three liaison committees for community risk management; informative material on the three components (Technical, Legal and Socio-Emotional); permanent information boards produced by students, teachers and other significant adults; 3 risk maps (1 for each community) built by the participants which served as geo-reference, and 3 emotional risk maps. 3 assemblies on community risk had been held by student leaders.

For the month of January 2005, we had planned to incorporate the two remaining communities. Before starting this second phase, we made adjustments to the socio-emotional component of the Project, because in the work of the first phase we found that post-traumatic anxiety was still latent in the people of Vargas as a result of the 1999 tragedy. However, at the beginning of February, one strong trough was registered in the country and the state of Vargas was declared in emergency. This forced us to reorient the actions and goals of the Project.

### **Before, during and after the emergency**

Although the Project was conceived to intervene only in the before (Education / Prevention), the emergency forced us to act in the during and the after.

As of February 10, there were already 35 shelters in Vargas State, with a total of 7,705 affected people, of which 3,192 were boys and girls. The three components (Technical, Legal and Socio-Emotional) of the Prevention Project showed their importance and comprehensiveness, and the informative material previously developed served as immediate input for those responsible for shelters.

We were able to know the during through the testimonies of the people trained in the Project between October and December 2004, especially the Student Leaders. In community meetings and conferences, the young people reported that the lessons learned helped them to act with greater wisdom in the emergency situation, giving themselves protection and helping others.

Some of the testimonials are summarized in phrases such as:

*"I kept calm and passed it on"*

*"I knew where to go at the time of the flood thanks to the risk maps we made with the firefighters"*

*"I did not allow the children to be taken alone ... I learned that from Dr. Maria (the defender)"*

## **A Coordinated Action Plan assumed from the institutional and community maturity of the Varguenses... The sense of transcendence.**

At the time of the emergency, many allied organizations came forward to offer their help and institutional guidance to face the emergency in Vargas. This aid was led by the *Fundación del Niño Vargas*, inviting to concert efforts around a Coordinated Action Plan for the Strengthening of Varguense Families and Communities in vulnerable situations, which allowed to amplify the lessons obtained with the Risk Management Project Community and propose prospects that will consolidate a culture of risk prevention. The 23 participating institutions agreed to promote the following action lines:

- Promote the adaptation of regional policies and regulations on risk prevention from the perspective of protection and rights
- Promote training, technical assistance and training of human resources in the area of prevention
- Promote community networks in prevention for immediate and permanent attention in the social-emotional area and stress control for children, adolescents, families and women.
- Promote student leadership in the region in prevention matters.

### **It is not enough to write plans, regulations and / or laws, its execution is required**

With enthusiasm and conviction, 23 institutions established the Coordinated Action Plan with the idea that it would be transformed into a Decree Law by the Legislative Council of the state of Vargas; however, the material damage left by the trough, the reconstruction of homes, care and relocation of victims, among others, became priorities, leaving postponed that Plan, losing the initial momentum. Many of its promoters, including myself, stopped providing services in the Vargas state, and later a new Governor was elected, thereby definitively abandoning the idea of promoting this Plan.

From the initial Project, the georeferential maps and the socio-emotional maps remained, which with the support of Unicef were subsequently taken into permanent material that even today, 12 years after that experience, are exhibited in the Educational Centers of the communities that participated in the project.

Furthermore, I am sure that the comprehensive learning about prevention and risk management that we transmitted there definitively transformed the 114 people trained especially the 62 children and adolescents. And that makes me say: it was worth it!