Macilia's Story: Caring for Extended Family in Disaster's Wake

Macilia lives in Guilloux, a small town in southwestern Haiti near Les Cayes. Guilloux is far enough away from the epicenter of Haiti’s January 2010 earthquake that on that day, Macilia only felt the ground tremble. While most of the area’s homes withstood the tremors, the quake still impacted Macilia and her neighbors.

Following the disaster, the number of people living in Macilia’s house more than doubled. Like many of her neighbors, Macilia had taken in family members who fled Port-au-Prince in the quake’s aftermath—she was hosting 12 relatives whose homes were destroyed. However, the situation of Macilia and her neighbors is not unusual. Many communities outside the capital were affected by the influx of displaced family members. A month after the earthquake, an estimated 400,000 people were seeking refuge in communities outside the quake zone.

Hosting additional family put a lot of strain on Macilia. First and foremost, it is difficult to feed everyone. In Macilia’s words, “12 people are not 12 stones, they need to be fed.” Providing nourishment for the entire family was complicated by a few things. Since farming is the main source of food, the increase in the number of people to feed put tremendous strain on the community’s resources.

In addition, less food was being transported to sell in Port-au-Prince and the extra food in local markets caused the selling price to drop. This was especially hard on Macilia, who sells food to support her family. For instance, she previously sold one papaya for 50 gourdes ($1.29), but now could only charge 20 to 25 gourdes ($.55).

Simultaneously, the price of goods transported to rural communities from Port-au-Prince, such as oil, candles, salt and other items, rose. The combination of these factors made it difficult for Macilia and others like her to provide their families with everything they need.

While she admitted that each day was a struggle, Macilia was grateful for the support she received as a member of the community-based association GROSO FANM. This group, supported by the Episcopal Diocese of Haiti and Episcopal Relief & Development, comprised 30 local women who grow cacao and use it to produce chocolate products, including chocolate bars, drinks, powders and cakes.

The women of GROSO FANM also ran a trading business – until the demand for goods from Port-au-Prince decreased, they bought locally produced goods to resell in the capital. To help members struggling to cope with an influx of relatives and also solve the problem of decreased demand for goods in Port-au-Prince, the association liquidated its stock of corn, dividing the profits among members. Although GROSO FANM experienced losses because of the low market price of corn (corn previously purchased at 15 gourdes [$.39] had to be sold at only 10 gourdes [$.26]), the liquidation provided association members like Macilia with up to 1,560 gourdes ($40). The extra income enabled them to buy additional goods to feed their families, such as yams, oil, meat and spices.

GROSO FANM is just one example of the more than 1,500 community-based associations and micro-finance groups that the Episcopal Diocese of Haiti has helped create over the years with support from Episcopal Relief & Development. As Macilia put it, CEDDISEC, the development and relief arm of the diocese, hasn’t just been “throwing stones at the sun.” Rather, the organization has intentionally developed the capacity of GROSO FANM and other groups to sustain members in troubled times such as this.