

Natural disasters in Latin America and the Caribbean: national, regional and international interactions

A regional case study on the role of the affected state in humanitarian action

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1. Introduction

1.1. Latin America and the Caribbean region

Throughout its history the region that encompasses Latin America and the Caribbean – from Mexico south and to the east – has been among the most disaster prone in the world: Volcanoes, earthquakes, droughts and floods – the last, a consequence of the El Niño phenomenon and yearly cycles of major tropical storms widely believed to have been intensified by global warming. Comparing the years 1971–75 with 2002–2005, the frequency of droughts increased 360%, of hurricanes 521%, and of floods 266%.¹ Such increases are evident globally. However, scarcely a country in the region, which has a population of approximately 500 million, has escaped serious damage from disasters within the past two to three years. There is no single catastrophe of the dimension of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami or the 2008 Chinese earthquake, but the disasters affecting the region are relentless, frequent, and locally highly destructive. Approximately three-quarters of the population is estimated to live in at-risk areas,² and one-third live in areas highly exposed to hazards.³ At the end of 2007, the UN Office for the Coordination of

Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported that it had sent a record nine missions to the region during that year, out of a total of 14 globally.⁴ In Central America and Mexico floods, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions have occurred one after another. The Andean region is especially vulnerable to volcanic activity, floods and earthquakes; the Caribbean to hurricanes that come irregularly but unfailingly from late summer to late autumn. In almost every case, recovery has been slow and national development plans have been set back significantly.⁵

¹ Pan American Health Organization/World Health Organization, 'Progress Report on National and Regional Health Disaster Preparedness and Response,' CD47/INF.4, August 2, 2006. 47th Directing Council, 58th Session of the Regional Committee, Washington DC, p. 6

² PAHO, *Ibid.* p.16

³ OCHA, 'Risk, Emergency & Disaster Task Force for Latin America and the Caribbean,' REDLAC-IASC, 02, 2008, ppt.

⁴ Jo Tuckerman, 'Latin America Hit by Record Number of Disasters, says UN,' *The Guardian* December 28, 2007. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/dec/28/mainse-ction.international/print>

⁵ Inter-American Development Bank, *Indicators of Disaster Risk and Risk Management Program for Latin American*

Latin America is fortunate in that the conflicts of the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s, once almost as pervasive as natural disasters, are largely in the past. A serious exception is Colombia where conflict persists and overlaps with natural disasters. The economic and social conditions that gave rise in large part to the conflicts have changed little over the past decade. Although Latin America and the Caribbean region is classified as 'Middle Income' in financial and donor circles, the overall figures mask extremes in economic inequalities in most parts of the hemisphere – combined with ethnic discrimination and general poverty. The poorer members of the population tend to live in the most at-risk places, and suffer the greatest losses.⁶

The ability of governments in the region to deal effectively with the altogether predictable disasters is uneven, although virtually all of them acknowledge their responsibility to meet the challenges of assisting and protecting victims. Each country has an established system for national disaster management, as well as criteria for engaging the international community. Actual institutional capacities to prepare for and deal with disasters vary considerably. Countries bordering on one another and more often than not experiencing the same storms and subject to the same kind of earthquake damage, nonetheless have quite different levels of preparedness and organisational arrangements (e.g. the range of response capacity among the Andean nations of Colombia, Peru and Bolivia; or the Caribbean island nations of Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Haiti). Governments in the region have usually looked to their respective Armed Forces to meet the emergencies that strike, but to varied degrees have installed civilian leadership for broader disaster management functions and to lead recovery efforts. An important distinction is the

and the Caribbean, Summary Report, updated, prepared by Omar D. Cardona, March 2008. This report defines and provides measurement tools regarding development losses in the region due to major disaster events.

⁶ *Ibid.* The report classifies the LAC countries according to vulnerability, defining vulnerability and therefore disaster risk as 'the result of inadequate economic growth ... and deficiencies that may be corrected by means of adequate development processes,' p. 12. Countries in Central America, the Caribbean and Andean regions rank particularly high on vulnerability.

degree of decentralisation and leadership at departmental and municipal levels – all-important in responding to emergencies and even more so in activities aimed at risk reduction and prevention.

Disaster responses have improved in many LAC countries, but in most still are found wanting. International assessment missions (UNDAC) and other independent evaluations, some of which are cited here, have documented major gaps in coordination, in communications, and in citizen participation and awareness on the response side. And they have pointed to institutional weaknesses within disaster response and management mechanisms, nationally and locally. All the governments have pledged to prioritise risk reduction, prevention and preparedness, but when disasters have struck, the critics can always point to faulty infrastructure, hospitals that have not yet been made disaster resistant, water management systems that fail and, especially, to the presence of too many people living in extremely disaster-prone places. Governments in LAC largely depend on international funding for prevention and mitigation efforts.⁷ This is the case even in the wealthier countries like Peru, Chile and Colombia which, while disaster-prone and committed to risk reduction and prevention policies, have mixed records in terms of investing their own resources in prevention and recovery projects. Both wealthier and more poorly endowed countries have sought internationally funded programmes and technical assistance for disaster response and longer-term prevention actions.

The two issues most often cited to explain why the governments in the region do not perform as well as they could in disaster management overall are (1) over-reliance on military sector leadership and (2) lack of political will to devote national resources to disaster management and particularly to disaster prevention, despite rhetorical commitments to the latter. In this regard, informants inside and outside of the international community underscored a dilemma for international disaster assistance. On the one hand international donor agencies and

⁷ There are degrees of dependence. Cuba is by all accounts has done the best in preparing its population to deal with disasters. Nevertheless, seeks internationally funding for risk reduction projects and recovery. Colombia is also given high marks for its national system for disasters.

NGOs feel bound to respond to disasters and (to smaller extent) disaster recovery efforts when called upon by governments to do so. This in turn removes some of the urgency for governments to establish sufficiently funded mechanisms for response and early recovery, even if there are resources available for these purposes. As will be seen in the country-based summaries below, national and local governments vie for visibility in responding at the outset of a disaster but cannot necessarily follow through. Additionally, it is the international agencies, more than the governments themselves, that are promoting and supporting disaster risk reduction (DRR) activities. The challenge then is to make such activities a *national* rather than an *international* priority. This report will argue that the efforts of a wide range of regional agencies addressing disaster management and risk reduction may produce this desired objective.

As will be elaborated, a number of internationally funded programmes of different kinds in Latin America are aimed at improving national and local capacities. Disaster management and response capacities seem to be growing in some countries and there are promising indications in others, albeit more slowly in prevention. When disasters strike, international emergency relief and support has proved lifesaving and essential. That said, there is concern in the region about the manner in which the international system has defined its disaster response roles, and the reduced levels of support from international donors for regional capacity-building programmes. The concerns are expressed not only among the Latin Americans affected by disasters, but also among international officials seeking appropriate and effective ways to build on existing resources and strengthen state capacities.

To a greater extent than in other regions, Latin American and Caribbean governments have established regional entities to help them define needs, share information and training opportunities, and elaborate projects. Similarly, the international community is operating regionally, sub-regionally and nationally to encourage inter-agency collaborative efforts across borders and among international organisations, donors and non-government agencies. What is truly exceptional in the Latin America/Caribbean region is the commitment of virtually every regional organisation to incorporate disaster management and disaster risk reduction in their institutional mandates and to

support national institutions in these areas. Since before the beginning of the present decade, regional entities devoted to governance, development, health, education and poverty alleviation have supported more comprehensive disaster management policies and tools.

1.2 Methodology

This report was prepared on the basis of written reports and interviews. The former are listed in the bibliography. The latter, also listed, included both face-to-face interviews and telephone interviews. These interviews represent (1) regional and disaster experts; (2) members of UN bodies and non-governmental organisations working in the region; (3) national experts, including governments in the affected countries. Unless otherwise cited, the opinions and much of the explanatory information come from interviewees who are not cited by name in the text.

1.3. Overview

The pages that follow are necessarily superficial in covering ‘affected government’ responses and in elaborating the impacts and steps taken in specific disasters. The report is divided into three

segments. First, the report describes the institutional structures and mechanisms put in place to deal with disasters. These include (a) the organisational networks that have been created at the regional and sub-regional levels to cope with and enhance responses to disasters and to link with national mechanisms in the member countries; and (b) the international organisations, including NGOs, operating regionally and nationally. The nature of the regional and international operations is a major focus of this report.

Second, referring to the disaster emergencies in 2007 in Peru, Bolivia, and Mexico, the report will elaborate actions taken during and after disasters, their consequences, and the shortcomings of national and international efforts. The case summaries will cover different aspects of each country’s experiences that shed light on interactions between national and international actors and mechanisms.

Third, the report will review the shortcomings in both national and international disaster support, and discuss points of contestation and debate between and among international, regional and local entities.

2. Disaster related regional and subregional organisations

In addition to structures at national and local levels with responsibility for disaster management⁸, governments in the region have established sub-regional organisations to serve as sources of information, to initiate regional projects and to set priorities related to disaster responses prevention and preparedness. The directors of these organisations (particularly CDERA) contend, and there is reason to accept their contentions, that their presence and activities have had the effect of strengthening disaster mechanisms and policies in member states.

2.1. Regional and sub-regional coordination organisations: CEPREDENAC, CDERA, CAPRADE

There are three inter-governmental regional organisations dedicated to coordinating disaster-related activities, disseminating information and bringing national decision-makers together to discuss regional initiatives. The largest, oldest and most active is the Central American entity, the Coordination Center for Natural Disaster Prevention, CEPREDENAC, founded in 1988, the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Committee, CDERA, established in 1991, and the Andean Committee for Disaster Prevention and Assistance, created in 2002. Each is an inter-governmental network with a permanent Secretariat. All three state their primary mission to be the strengthening of disaster prevention and preparedness through regional planning, information, training and coordination. Their statutes have been ratified by their member states, and their policies are determined by high-level representation from member states. The three secretariats, which are small, sponsor events, workshops and regional meetings, disseminate guidelines and information, and work with donors for regional initiatives. Member governments in the three entities participate and make use of information, training and so on, but contribute barely enough funding to support the salaries of a small secretariat. The actual activities of the three regional secretariats, therefore, depend largely on what can be funded from external sources. They have received varying amounts of donor assistance and training, and have participated with international bodies in regional meetings.

⁸ The case examples that follow will cover national structures, mechanisms and their operation.

CEPREDENAC includes the Central American countries (Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, as well as Belize and the Dominican Republic with observer status). Governments are represented by their disaster focal points at CEPREDENAC regional meetings. The Headquarters is presently in Guatemala, whose government contributes to staff support. Created as a technical and scientific facility in the late 1980s, the governments of the region asked CEPREDENAC to develop a Regional Plan for Disaster Reduction in 1993, which has been periodically updated and forms the basis of national disaster policies. CEPREDENAC turned more attention to documenting issues of vulnerability and promoting prevention after Hurricane Mitch in 1998. Hurricane Mitch was a watershed event in Central America and caused national leaders to pay serious attention to all phases of disaster planning and management. Donors responded for a few years with significantly increased funding for CEPREDENAC which was seen as a potentially viable vehicle for such planning. Then funding declined somewhat. Over the past two years the organisation has been more proactive in seeking direct donor support, including a preparation/response project with the US Southern Command. The small core staff has been expanded with funding for particular projects. Member governments usually send their disaster focal points to meetings, and the Secretariat is urging further participation by policy decision-makers.

The Caribbean Disaster Emergency Response Agency, CDERA, is a regional inter-governmental agency, headquartered in Barbados. It was established in September 1991 by the Caribbean Community, CARICOM, with a mandate to take responsibility for disaster management policies in the region. The 16 members include Anguilla, the British Virgin Islands and Turks and Caicos and all CARICOM Member States except Haiti and Suriname, which are considered 'participating' states. In 2001 CARICOM adopted a Strategy and Results Framework for Comprehensive Disaster Management (CDM), to link disaster management to development decision-making and planning.⁹ Member states are represented in CDERA both by their disaster focal

⁹ CDERA, 'Toward Reviewing and Reshaping Comprehensive Disaster Management, CDM,' paper presented September 25-26, 2006, Belize.

points and policy-makers. With the CDM in place, CDERA will change its name, replacing the 'Response' with 'Management', indicating an agreed upon expansion of the organisational mandate beyond disaster response. Government members fund ten staff members, while international donors fund special projects and programmes.

The Andean Committee for Disaster Prevention and Assistance, CAPRADE, is the newest and, for now, the weakest of the three regional entities. It includes Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela. Each has designated representatives in the organisation, usually drawn from the Ministry of Defence or Planning. CAPRADE has received international support to develop a Plan of Action for programmes and projects to be carried out by the member states. Like the other regional organisations, it proposes to play a coordinating role in planning, prevention of natural disasters, attention during disasters, and rehabilitation and reconstruction following disasters. The organisation has encouraged mutual assistance and information sharing.¹⁰ CAPRADE was supportive of national efforts during the disasters of 2007, but not yet prepared to play a significant role

2.2. Civil society and disasters

La Red (The network) is a loosely organised group established in Costa Rica in 1992, with members in Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico and Peru. These members, representing different areas of expertise and drawn from NGOs, academia, governmental and international organisations, have been dedicated to disaster prevention and the dissemination of disaster-related analysis and information. The organisation initially approached disasters primarily from a theoretical perspective based on social analysis, but has evolved to include the participation and perspectives of individuals and regional institutions concerned with risk reduction and practical policies. The members communicate electronically for the most part and maintain an informative website.¹¹ La Red's database, Desinventar, is a work in progress. There are currently three versions of the programme, all of which were created with the goal of developing an online framework that provides a central virtual

¹⁰ http://www.caprade.org/deci_591.htm.

¹¹ www.desenredando.org. Additional information on La Red comes from interviews.

location for professionals to share conceptual and methodological tools regarding disaster relief and mitigation, along with other disaster-related information.¹²

In addition to La Red, the LAC region has a dynamic civil society and a large number of active local non-government organisations. La Red includes members of such NGOs and civil society groups, as well as academics and members of international bodies working in disaster-related activities.

2.3. International regional bodies

2.3.1. Regional hub

Panama now serves as a significant regional hub for humanitarian and development agencies with mandates related to disaster prevention, management and mitigation. The government of Panama has encouraged this and the country offers important geographic advantages for region-wide disaster-related work. Bridging north and south and is located on the Caribbean, Panama has long been a hub for air traffic, so it is relatively easy to travel almost anywhere. Agencies find it convenient to store material needed for disaster response in Panamanian warehouses.

The fact that the major UN agencies, along with several donors and NGO regional offices, are in one place invites greater collaboration than might otherwise be the case. There are frequent scheduled workshops and shared training exercises. Agency heads meet to discuss strategies, and to share information.

2.3.2. REDLAC

The OCHA regional office ROLAC chairs REDLAC, the Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Task Force for Risk, Emergency and Disasters, established in 2003 under the Inter Agency Standing Committee. The majority of the permanent members of REDLAC have offices in Panama with disaster management focal points. These are UNICEF, WFP, UNDP/BCPR, PAHO/WHO, the IOM, the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, the UN Environment Program, UNFPA, FAO and the Economic Commission for Latin America. Major agencies outside the UN are 'Guests' of REDLAC. These include the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, which has established a Pan American Disaster

¹² <http://online.desinventar.org/>.

Response Unit (PADRU) in Panama¹³; ARE International, World Vision International, Plan International and Oxfam. Donor guest participants are ECHO, USAID/OFDA, Spanish Cooperation and the regional and sub-regional institutions CEPREDENAC, CDERA CAPRADE.

REDLAC serves as a coordination point among UN agencies and international NGOs with regional headquarters in Panama, enabling more comprehensive attention to disasters and bringing regional issues to the attention of their respective headquarters. The work of the members has been largely devoted to disaster preparedness and response; in the last two years, however, several REDLAC members have taken the lead in broadening REDLAC's thematic scope to include disaster risk reduction. PAHO, UN/ISDR, UNICEF, UNDP/BCPR and IFRC figure prominently in this effort, which is associated with longer-term perspectives. Currently there are three main thematic subgroups working on Disaster Preparedness/Response; Early Recovery and Disaster Reduction, and a cross-cutting subgroup on information management, including but not limited to early warning.

The international agencies, largely through REDLAC, have hosted workshops for LAC on the operation and implications of the so-called humanitarian reform system, the major expression of which is the 'Cluster' response approach to emergencies. The ongoing discussions and critiques from LAC have contributed to a rethinking and some reformulation of the cluster mechanism at the global level. This is further discussed below.

Everyone interviewed for this report affirmed the benefits of the regional hub and REDLAC and credited its presence with having enhanced coordination and effective responses to disaster. This was the case for the UN agencies as well as for

¹³ PADRU was established in 2001. Upon request from national chapters, this regional IFRC entity coordinates and facilitates responses to regional crises from other Red Cross and Red Crescent societies. When a disaster needs a response beyond national capacities, the PADRU unit in Panama will send an assessment mission to ascertain needs. Then, depending on findings, it will dispatch a team of people to assist in response. Teams were dispatched to Peru and Bolivia, but the Mexico chapter requested only specific expertise. On an ongoing basis, PADRU works with national chapters to strengthen capacities. Its activities include training for sustainable prevention at the community level.

NGO participants. All believed that they had a more measured and better-informed sense of regional needs and capacities than headquarters-located officials, and were well positioned to negotiate and coordinate field operations. They also disagreed with the notion that it would be more efficient for country-level teams to communicate with and respond directly to headquarters. On the contrary, the sense not only of the Panama-based UN officials, but also of officials and staff located outside of the hub, was that having an entity with regional expertise proved helpful in establishing common policies and resolving issues of contention. This issue is further discussed below.

2.3.3. Key international and regional disaster/emergency entities in Panama

- OCHA established its regional office for Latin America and the Caribbean (RO-LAC) in 2003. Since its inception, the office has been largely devoted to inter-agency coordination related to disasters.¹⁴ From its regional office, OCHA exercises oversight over the UN Disaster Management Teams (UNDMT) and the UN Emergency Technical teams at the national levels and, as noted, chairs the inter-agency network REDLAC.
- The Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery (BCPR) (UNDP) posted a Disaster Reduction Advisor unit to Panama in 2002 to provide support to the approximately 30 UNDP disaster focal points in the region. The major emphases are risk reduction, capacity building and sustainable disaster reconstruction programs.
- ISDR has a regional office in Panama. As in other parts of the world, ISDR is focused on improving national compliance with the Hyogo Framework for Action on disasters, agreed in 2005. It engages with national partners in different sectors (health, education, agriculture, housing) to promote risk reduction.
- The Regional Disaster Information Center for Latin America and the Caribbean (CRID) was established in 1997 in San Jose, Costa Rica, when five organisations agreed to pool their

¹⁴ This is also true of the OCHA Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, founded in 2005.

disaster-related information and cooperate in its dissemination: PAHO, ISDR, the IFRC, MSF (regional office) and the Costa Rica National Risk Prevention and Emergency Commission. PAHO and ISDR provide most of the resources for CRID, supplemented by European donors and the system's users.

- REDHUM is an inter-agency humanitarian website launched in 2007, with help from ReliefWeb. It is a source of information about disaster preparation and response, publishes situation reports about actual disasters, posts activity announcements and gives practical information about vacancies and humanitarian personnel. REDHUM works in partnership with CRID and with CEPREDENAC. It operates under the umbrella of and with the strong support of REDLAC, which helped it secure funding.¹⁵ Its analyses are not only technical, but also intended to guide decision-makers by presenting lessons learned from past experiences.
- The international disaster focal points for the various international agencies operating in disaster prone countries form United Nations Technical Teams for Emergencies, linked to the Disaster Management Teams in each country, under the Resident Representative.¹⁶ The UN Country Teams report to OCHA in Panama and, at government request, will formally seek international assistance in disaster response. The country teams work on an ongoing basis with governments to build capacity.

2.3.4. Regional organisations with dedicated disaster programmes

Agencies not primarily devoted to disasters have also been important in planting disaster

management squarely in the context of national development.

- The Pan American Health Organization, the regional organisation of the WHO, warrants special treatment among the agencies concerned with disaster management because of its success in bringing disaster preparedness into health agendas.¹⁷ In 1976, at the request of the member states, PAHO activities moved from a focus on response to prevention, risk reduction, preparedness and recovery.¹⁸ PAHO's operations are almost entirely conducted on behalf of and in partnership with health ministries. Its efforts have resulted in the establishment of disaster management offices in the health ministries of more than three-quarters of the LAC countries.¹⁹ Two particularly relevant actions have been (1) the push for hospitals and health facilities that are 'disaster-safe' and (2) the introduction of a system for tracking international disaster assistance (SUMA), which is now widely used, along with CRID, in disaster-affected countries.
- The United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, (ECLAC) was established in 1948 to promote economic and social development and to encourage economic cooperation among its member states. It is one of five regional economic commissions created by the UN. Disaster analysis has become an important aspect of its work, especially through its Mexico office. At the request of regional governments, ECLAC has deployed teams to assess the economic and social effects of major disasters.
- The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) has adopted a policy on disaster risk management that embeds the concept of integrated disaster management into overall

¹⁵ Funding for REDHUM came from the Spanish International Cooperation Agency, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, the government of Kuwait and OCHA.

¹⁶ The operation and objectives of the UNETE structures are examined in more detail in Fagen, 'El Salvador: A Case Study in the Role of the Affected State in Humanitarian Action', ODI/HPG, March 2008.

¹⁷ The Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Relief office of PAHO is in the Washington DC Headquarters.

¹⁸ PAHO, *A Secure and Disaster-Resistant Health Sector in the Americas: Strategic Plan 2008 -2012*, Washington DC 2008.

¹⁹ PAHO *2006 Annual Report*, <http://www.disaster-info.net>

national development strategies. As with PAHO, the IDB moved after 2003 from efforts limited to disaster response to disaster planning and risk reduction. In 2007 the Bank rolled out its Disaster Risk Management Policy, aimed at supporting borrowers to reduce the consequences of natural hazards by reducing risks and vulnerabilities before disasters occur, and in rebuilding after disasters.²⁰ It covers 14 countries. The involvement of the IDB is important because its interlocutors are Ministries of Finance and Planning, in other words, key decision-makers that oversee long-term development.

2.3.5 Regionally prominent international NGOs

The major NGOs operating in disaster response in the LAC region are the IFRC, CARE, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Oxfam GB, Plan International and World Vision International. These are highly regarded and professional agencies, with worldwide experience dealing with emergencies, recovery and community-level development. They usually have ongoing projects in the various countries that have experienced disasters, and therefore can use resources already in the country for disaster relief. Additionally, these NGOs contribute to recovery efforts, including agricultural revitalisation and ongoing work with local authorities.

The IFRC works through national Red Cross societies; CRS works through local CARITAS agencies and other agencies have hired largely national staff members, so language, cultural affinities and familiarity with national realities can be assumed. The destruction caused by Hurricane Mitch in 1998 increased donor and NGO interest in disaster risk reduction programmes. (CARE at one time had 300 projects related to DRR in Central America.²¹) These remain a high priority, and NGOs have instituted training modules on DRR for local staff.

2.3.6 Regional training

USAID/OFDA has funded a Regional Disaster Assistance Program in the region, within which is a training programme that has been operating since 1989 (adding the Caribbean in 1991). It provides instruction in strategic planning, organisational development, the evaluation of national and local risk management programmes, inter-institutional coordination, and preparation of emergency action plans at local, departmental and national levels. The Costa Rica-based staff build its training modules on specific country capacities and needs. The programme has trained over 44,000 people, some 4,600 of whom have become instructors themselves. This project takes credit for having trained a cadre of regional leaders in disaster management.²²

²⁰ The Bank contracted a series of studies and summary report that elaborated a methodology and indicators for disaster risk management for 14 countries. It was coordinated and prepared by the Instituto de Estudios Ambientales (IDEA) at the Colombian National University.

²¹ Correspondence Rigoberto Giron, June 16, 2008.

²² The programme, based in Costa Rica, has been implemented by the International Resources Group, USAID, Latin America and the Caribbean-Disaster Preparedness and Mitigation Programs, *Fact Sheet #1*, September 30, 2007. http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/humanitarian_assistance/disaster_assistance/publications/prep_mit/mods/program_updates/lac_dp_fs01_09-30-2007.pdf. http://www.irgltd.com/Resources/Publications/Profile_A_C_OFDA.pdf.

3. Country cases: disasters in Peru, Bolivia, Mexico and the Dominican Republic in 2007

3.1. Peru earthquake 2007²³

On 15 August 2007, an earthquake struck off the coast of Peru's Ica Department. The initial quake measured 7.0 on the Richter Scale and reached 7.9 on the moment of magnitude scale. The epicentre was in the Pacific Ocean about 30 miles west-northwest of Chincha, about 90 miles south of the capital city, Lima. Multiple aftershocks followed the next day, reaching magnitudes of 6.2, which caused additional damage throughout the region. Affected areas included southwestern coastal areas, especially cities within Ica including Pisco, Chincha Alta and Ica, as well as the Province of Canete in the Department of Lima. Although some of the affected communities in Ica are remote and difficult to access, the departmental capital, Pisco, was surrounded by passable roads and remained sufficiently intact to serve as a national and international centre of operations. Nevertheless, the two days of seismic activity brought down hospitals, homes, schools, churches, government buildings and infrastructure throughout the region. Phone services also collapsed, which complicated relief efforts. The President requested international assistance at once.

Peru is located on the Pacific Ocean, bordered by Ecuador, Chile, Brazil and Bolivia, with the Andes Mountains running the length of the country. It is a country rich in mineral resources, but economically one of the most unequal in the hemisphere. Peru is highly earthquake-prone – some 70,000 were killed in a 1970 quake – and is also subject to drought and flooding due to the El Niño phenomenon. Governments have long understood that national development planning must incorporate disaster planning. The state has had a disaster management mechanism in place since the 1980s, led by the National Institute for Civil Defense (INDECI). The structure was largely dismantled during the government of Alberto Fujimori, but then recreated after 2000. Although a civilian agency under the presidency, INDECI is headed by a former military officer, as has been the pattern in the past.

²³ Much of the account here is taken from Samir Elhawary and Gerardo Castillo, 'The Role of the Affected State: A Case Study on the Peruvian Earthquake Response,' HPG Working Paper, April 2008.

The government has placed increased disaster planning responsibilities at provincial and local levels, as part of a general political and economic decentralisation meant to improve conditions in poorer regions. Local governments, therefore, presumably have resources allocated to cope with emergency events, at least up to a point. It should be added that despite the pervasive poverty in Peru, the national government has ample resources at present thanks to its mineral wealth, and can afford an effective disaster management system. To date, it has not invested heavily in disaster management.

There is general agreement that the national disaster management structure is well designed and appropriate and could operate effectively if it were better coordinated and funded and more participatory. Smaller disaster events should be handled at the local level through multi-sector civil defence committees established under INDECI. The civil defence committees include local government authorities, police, armed forces, health officials and various non-government entities. If the disaster surpasses local capacities, as certainly occurred in the 2007 earthquake, a regional, and then a national-level response is supposed to be mobilised and, if necessary, the national government will seek international assistance.

In the case of the earthquake of 2007, local civil defence efforts disintegrated at once and regional authorities did not mobilise their response mechanisms in time to respond effectively. ²⁴ President Alan Garcia neither waited for INDECI to respond, nor enlisted INDECI mechanisms at national, regional or local levels. He declared a state of emergency on 15 August, the same day as the initial quake, sent the military to deal with the quake directly, and officially requested international support. He then flew to the region the next day to assess the situation and sent an array of ministers to Pisco to coordinate government aid and relief

²⁴ General information on the earthquake is found in the OCHA, *Peru Earthquake 2007 Flash Appeal*. Consolidated Appeals Process; Elhawary and Castillo describe the events, and further information came from an interview with Castillo on June 17, 2008; El Mundo, 'Perú: Declaran estado de emergencia ante la magnitud de daños por sismo. Más de 300 muertos y 1.300 heridos,' August 16, 2007.

efforts. He ordered the suspension of activities in over 52,000 schools so that teachers could assess structural damage to buildings, and made 90,000 Peruvian police officers available for service. He called for hospitals, health centres, military offices and police stations to remain open throughout the night to help those in need.

INDECI eventually took steps to reinforce local and regional efforts, and performance improved. By that time, however, the weaknesses shown by local authorities in dealing with the disaster earned them widespread criticism and may have affected later election results. More importantly, the fact that the President had bypassed the existing structures and established a parallel response apparently resulted in confusion and duplication of systems. Thanks to his visibility and attention at the outset, however, Garcia saw a sharp rise in his popularity, albeit not a lasting one.²⁵ In the end, international action, from NGOs and UN agencies, proved essential for all phases of the response and is largely credited with having prevented large-scale loss of life. National estimates of the death toll varied between 519 and 595,²⁶ over 1,000 people were injured and more than 70,000 families were affected.²⁷ Tragic though it was, this was a far lower number than probably would have been the case had there not been a broad response nationally and internationally.

Following the emergency, Garcia promised to rebuild quickly. Again, in keeping with decentralisation, local authorities were supposed to initiate recovery actions. Given the enormity of the destruction, the local and regional government entities representing affected sectors (housing, health, agriculture, infrastructure, etc.) could not cope. The government opted for a funding model that had been used in Colombia in 1999 with positive results, combining private sector and civil society organisations. Created on 29 August, it was called the Fund for the

²⁵ His popularity fell again soon afterwards, as recovery faltered and public attention reverted to other issues. Nelson Manrique, *Peru21*, October 115, 207 <http://www.peru21.com/comunidad/columnistas/Hrml/2007-10-15/manrique0799060.html>. Several articles in the press reported similarly.

16. IFRC, 'Emergency Appeal,' December 3, 2007, p.3, estimates from National Institute of Civil Defense (INDECI) and the Nation Institute for Statistics and Information (INEI

²⁷ OCHA, 'CAP-Peru Flash Appeal 2007,' August 21, 2007.

Reconstruction of the South (FORSUR).²⁸ FORSUR received significant resources, but has been far from a resounding success in achieving its reconstruction goals. At the time of writing, more than a year after the event, there are still people living in tents, and the thorny issues related to compensation for losses have yet to be resolved. There is considerable rebuilding activity aimed at creating stronger and more resistant infrastructure, but little has actually been completed.²⁹ The August 2007 quake did not occur in the poorest area of the country (which would have been the indigenous highland areas) but rather in an economically important hub, but there is an extensive poor population and recovery efforts have responded least to their needs.

Critics regard FORSUR as a politicised entity. This perception is partly due to the fact that FORSUR is managed by a Presidency that represents a different political party than most of the authorities in the affected areas, but also due to perceptions that decisions in FORSUR appear more influenced by private sector interests than by civil society organisation partners. Local mayors also complain of being marginalised.

On the international side, while the government acted quickly to request international assistance, the first effective relief came from international NGO teams, primarily from CARE, OXFAM International, MSF, CRS and Action Against Hunger. The IFRC/PADRU regional office sent an assessment team, and dispatched a team that worked through the Peruvian Red Cross. These agencies could be quickly activated because they were working in the country already and therefore had personnel and equipment ready to assist victims and bring services to communities. The NGOs transferred their efforts from existing projects to the disaster zone, an action which did not require government approval. They sought and received additional staff, funds and relief material from their headquarters and directly from donors, and had the logistical assistance of the Peruvian army.³⁰

Upon the government's Declaration of Emergency, the UN sent an Assessment and Coordination team

²⁸ See Elhawary and Castillo, pp. 16-18.

²⁹ 'Lessons from an Earthquake,' *The Economist* August 16, 2008, 37.

³⁰ Numerous press releases from CARE, OXFAM, CRS. Email exchanges with CARE.

(UNDAC). OCHA established a sub office in Pisco,³¹ where the government had established an operational centre, and this proved useful both to government and international operations.³² The UN and other international agencies dispatched emergency response teams to the earthquake region (WFP, PAHO/WHO, IOM, UNICEF, UNESCO, UNDP/BCPR, ILO). The UN Peru Country Team did not recommend the implementation of the UN Cluster approach, as might have been expected, citing the short duration of the emergency and, significantly, the government capacity in place. Eleven sector working groups were formed, as foreseen in the cluster approach. But OCHA noted in its flash appeal, 'The designation of sector leads has been an entirely field-driven process based on capacities and needs identified at that level'.³³ In effect, the UN deferred to the advice of its country and regional teams: the UN working groups were organised to coincide with existing government ministerial and regional responsibilities for disaster response. The government made it clear that it would not accept the imposition of a cluster approach that superseded its own planning process.³⁴

Reconstruction is ongoing, but international funds have not been channelled necessarily through FORSUR. In one initiative, funded by UNDP/BCPR's Peru office, a multi-disciplinary project for the affected municipalities has been created to build capacities for local authorities and other actors.³⁵ The project operates at national, regional and local levels. In Pisco and its surrounding municipalities, UN personnel are directly advising mayors on how to establish community-based programmes for prevention and response, and to help with early recovery plans.³⁶ The project elaborates plans for meeting immediate needs of victims and for promoting recovery sector by sector: housing, sanitation, health, education, economic livelihoods, institutional and organisational strengthening, and

³¹ OCHA sub offices in the affected zone were unusual. The action was encouraged by the Panama regional office. Interview, Nils Kastberg, UNICEF, June 12, 2008.

³² Interview Claudia Cardenas, UNDP/BCPR, July 4, 2008.

³³ OCHA, Flash Appeal, p. 4.

³⁴ Interviews Elhawary, June 12, 2008. Douglas Reimer, OCHA, June 25, 2008, Ricardo Mena June 19, 2008.

³⁵ Municipalidad Provincial de Pisco, *Plan de Transición-Recuperación Temprana: Sismo de 15 de Agosto de 2007*. Pisco, May 2008.

³⁶ Interview Claudia Cardenas who is leading this effort for BCPR, July 4, 2008.

public order. In each sector, it specifies the roles or potential roles of national entities, international agencies and NGOs in the projects elaborated.³⁷ It is hoped that, by engaging local and international actors together, the recovery process can be oriented towards longer-term regional development planning.

Will the Peruvian state be better prepared for the next disaster? The shortcomings in its response to the 2007 earthquake were both structural and political. The system put in place was reasonable, but did not work well when tested. Many of the persons interviewed for this report concurred in citing political factors. First, at the time of the earthquake there was a new government and new political party in office, led by Alan Garcia. The President was determined to ensure control of government structures by appointing his own people to them. Thus, the officials running INDECI were new and inexperienced. Likewise at the local levels, large numbers of people who had been trained and had dealt with prior disasters had lost their positions in recent elections. The new officials, however well intentioned, were not prepared. The government, moreover, had only recently put into effect the reform process that decentralised responsibilities to local and regional officials. These officials were still learning how to manage their new responsibilities when the earthquake struck. The poor national response to the quake awakened authorities to the shortcomings in the system and there is some will to improve it. But, as of this writing, disaster preparedness is not yet a national priority. Local-level capacity building has accelerated, primarily initiated by international entities and NGOs rather than through INDECI.

3.2. Bolivia: flooding in 2007–2008

Bolivia is a mountainous and landlocked country in the middle of South America with one of the poorest economies in the hemisphere. The most economically troubled part of the country is located in the highlands, an area inhabited largely by indigenous Quechua- and Aymara-speaking people. Bolivia's capital, La Paz, is in the highlands and there is considerable friction between highland and lowland regions over political dominance by the former and economic dominance of the latter. The lowland areas, economically and ethnically more

³⁷ Pisco, *Plan de transición*, p.8

mixed, have prospered more from agriculture and, especially, natural gas production.

Bolivia experiences serious flooding every rainy season between November and March, with serious consequences for affected populations and the economy. In 2007 and 2008, continuous flooding caused first by El Niño and then La Niña³⁸ resulted in far more extensive damage throughout the country than usual. First, between January and March 2007, Bolivia experienced some of the worst rains it had seen in at least two decades, causing floods that started at higher elevations, quickly inundating the lowlands and affecting eight of Bolivia's nine departments. The government mobilised its System for Risk Reduction and Disaster Emergency Response (SISRADE), and its implementing agency, the National Council for Risk Reduction and Disaster and Emergency Response (CONRADE). The actual disaster response process in Bolivia is led by the Vice Ministry of Civil Defence and Integral Development (VIDECICODI), under the Defence Ministry. The appropriate actors at the national departmental and municipal levels responded with the limited resources available to them through their own emergency operational centres. National NGOs also mobilised, usually though not always partnered with international counterparts.³⁹ Both national and international NGOs received donor funding directly.

In Bolivia, neither the national government mechanisms nor the departmental or municipal entities were at or near the level that had been established in Peru. In the latter, the structures were in place but did not respond properly. In Bolivia, recent legislation had created a national system, but the system itself was largely empty. Longstanding local survival practices in the flooded zones, honed by repeated incidents over the years, proved wholly inadequate and the population required international support. The national government was not prepared – nor ever had been prepared – to intervene effectively.

As the seriousness of events became evident, the government requested international assistance, first declaring a State of Emergency in early February

³⁸ La Niña is produced by the opposite phenomenon to El Niño, but effects on the ground are similar.

³⁹ DIPECHO, for example, funds both national and international organisations engaged in disaster prevention and response at community levels.

2007, then a few weeks later a State of National Disaster. OCHA issued an appeal for a little over nine million dollars for six months, and numerous international agencies and NGOs responded. In its Executive Summary, OCHA's appeal emphasised the link between the disaster impact on the one hand and general poverty, food insecurity and malnutrition on the other, and urged the government to address all these challenges.⁴⁰

Agencies that responded to the 2007 floods reported various difficulties, largely bureaucratic, in carrying out their relief functions. Although both national and local officials were open to the international presence and sought to cooperate, the government had no system in place to manage or share information, and was unable to track international donations appropriately. Roles in Bolivian agencies were not clearly defined. It was difficult for international agencies to know where to turn.⁴¹

Two UNDAC missions came to Bolivia during this period. The first arrived just prior to the 2007 floods and the second at the height of the 2007–2008 floods which followed. The purpose of the first, at the request of the Bolivian government, was to examine the capacity of the country to address large-scale disasters in view of the country's susceptibility to major disaster events. Bolivia had taken steps to modernise its institutional and legal structures for disaster response, and the government was well aware that the structures were still weak.⁴² The UNDAC mission coincided with the onset of the March 2007 floods, so its recommendations had little impact on national responses at that time.

The 2007 UNDAC mission elaborated institutional shortcomings and made extensive and detailed recommendations aimed at improving performance at all levels. Some key recommendations were:

⁴⁰ UNOCHA, Consolidated Appeals Process, *Phenomenon El Niño Flash Appeal 2007 for Bolivia*, p.1.

⁴¹ These are well reported in IFRC, *Legal Issues from the International Response to the 2007 Floods in Bolivia*, Case Study commissioned by the International Disaster Response Laws, Rules and Principles Programme. Geneva, 2008, as well as in the UNDAC report.

⁴² OCHA *Misión de Equipo de UNDAC a Bolivia. Evaluación de la Capacidad Nacional para la respuesta a Desastres*, March, 2007.

- Moving from a militarised response model to one in which there was civilian leadership with broad powers to coordinate other relevant actors. This was expressed as advising a move away from the construct of ‘civil defence’ and towards one of ‘civil protection’). This would entail capacity building, education on preparedness and risk management, and greater participation of civil society.
- Embedding the theme of risk management in all planning exercises; systematic planning within and among the actors involved in disaster response, including line ministries, and departmental and municipal planning bodies.
- Professionalising the core personnel in disaster management, and incorporating their salaries into regular state and local budgets.
- Improving the operation of the Bolivian disaster funding mechanism.
- Improving state mechanisms for collaborating with external actors and donors, including NGOs; better means of registering and tracking the use of external donations.

The major section of the UNDAC report was devoted to detailing the inadequacies in Bolivian inter-ministry coordination, logistics, communications, shelter preparation etc. The report underscored the need for more clearly defined roles and responsibilities among the multiple Bolivian entities charged with disaster response and better coordination.

Unfortunately, there was little time to take action toward recovery or to buttress prevention. A few months later, in November 2007, another round of rain and flooding –this time from the La Niña effect – brought even greater devastation to essentially the same area. The effects were all the worse since rivers were still swollen and the affected areas were far from having recovered from the previous rains. With the new inundations, the water levels of the already swollen rivers in the departments of Cochabamba, Santa Cruz and Beni reached historic levels and created devastating floods. More than

94,000 families were affected by flooding, while mudslides, landslides and floodwaters caused over 75 deaths, as well as thousands of injuries and displacement. There was extensive damage to housing, infrastructure and agriculture. The loss of production, in turn, caused the prices of vegetables, chicken, meat, eggs, milk, and other staple products to increase by more than 100%.⁴³ Waterborne illnesses spread. Because of the prolonged nature of the disaster, relief efforts were undertaken at different periods.

As it had a few months before, the government declared a State of Emergency on 21 January 2008, then a Declaration of National Disaster three weeks later, requesting international assistance. Again, the governmental Civil Defence under VIDEICODI led the national emergency response, while Emergency Operation Centres at the national, departmental and municipal levels were activated. NGOs, private companies, the Bolivian Red Cross and individuals provided assistance, along with UN officers from FAO, IOM, UNDP, UNFPA, UN-HABITAT, UNICEF, WFP and PAHO/WHO.⁴⁴ Of these UNDP, UNICEF, WFP and PAHO have permanent offices in the country.

The second UNDAC mission, arriving mid-disaster in January 2008, was able to assess the extent to which national and local government entities had adopted the recommended measures.⁴⁵ To be sure, UNDAC’s objective on this occasion was to assess disaster needs not national capacities, but the observations nonetheless were telling. The team complained that a lack of coordinated institutional leadership at national level had weakened emergency operations at departmental and municipal levels. Poor information management and communications frustrated relief efforts and poorly equipped shelters increased the vulnerability of flood victims. The team observed that political factors were affecting the treatment of flood victims in some places. On the positive side, the team noted greater engagement and better coordination between and among agencies in government and among NGOs and civil society groups.

⁴³ OCHA, ‘Situation Report 11 Bolivia Floods,’ February 22, 2008.

⁴⁴ OCHA, *Consolidated Appeals Process, Phenomenon La Niña, Bolivia*, 2008.

⁴⁵ OCHA, Informe final de Misión UNDAC, Emergencia por Inundaciones en Bolivia, Fenómeno de la Niña, Bolivia January–February 2008.

One of the recommendations of the 2007 mission had been to strengthen civilian coordination of disaster management and broaden institutional and civil society participation in operations at all levels. Instead, the Bolivian Ministry of Defence focused on improving logistical effectiveness during disasters and looked to the military to do this. In January 2008, the Ministry created a Joint Command for Natural Disasters (CCDN). Unfortunately, the Ministry did not specify how this new entity would coordinate its powers with those of existing entities, including the existing leadership of Civil Defence. Local authorities already resented the imposition of the central government to which they were hostile on other grounds. The CCDN exacerbated this, and local resistance to the CCDN resulted in greater confusion and worse coordination. The UNDAC mission found itself mediating among the parties.⁴⁶ There are hopes that civilian pressures in Bolivia may result in limiting military dominance in future disaster response efforts, as the 2007 UNDAC report urged.

The UN presence was essential to disaster operations in Bolivia. Although the full array of disaster response agencies made their appearance, the UN country team in Bolivia, as in Peru, complied with the government's preference and did not request a cluster approach. Instead, the UN agencies aligned themselves as complementary to existing government structures. It remains to be seen how the mechanisms now in place in the country will be improved before the next disaster.

3.3. Mexico: October–November 2007 floods in Tabasco

During 2007 the Mexican states along the Gulf of Mexico and to the south suffered multiple storms and floods: Hurricane Dean caused major destruction in the Yucatan areas in August, affecting Mexico's lucrative tourist industry in addition to the local population. In September the states of Veracruz and Tamaulipas experienced the worst flooding in decades. In late October and early November 2007, in the most devastating incidents of all, the states of Chiapas and Tabasco were inundated with torrential rains.⁴⁷ By this time the

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 17.

⁴⁷ Tabasco and Chiapas share a border with Guatemala; to the north of Tabasco is the Bay of Campeche, and the Gulf of Tehuantepec borders the southern coast of Chiapas.

resources of the Mexican government at national and state levels, as well as those of the Mexican Red Cross and the local non-governmental assistance organisations, were badly stretched.

The serious flooding in the two states resulted from heavy rains brought on by two continuous cold fronts and disturbances caused by Tropical Storm Noel, in combination with a regional geography that makes the isthmus susceptible to the damaging effects of water. Heavy rains are expected in this region but, in this instance, the extent of the destruction was not at all within the historical norm. Flooding destroyed houses, infrastructure, schools and farms, while paralysing daily life throughout much of the region. Nearly 80% of the state of Tabasco was covered in water and, according to the National System of Civil Protection, the flooding displaced over 126,500 people.⁴⁸ Over one million people were affected by the disaster, making it the largest natural disaster in recent Mexican history.

The National Water and Electricity Commission decided on 28 October to partially open the floodgates of dams because water levels threatened to undermine the dams structurally. Although the act was justified, in the midst of continuing and heavy rainfall it caused surrounding rivers to overflow and flood much of the state of Tabasco and portions of Chiapas by 1 November. Over the longer term, the extent of damage in Tabasco had much to do with two unattended risk factors: first, there were dangerous levels of sediment blocking areas of the rivers feeding into the affected communities; second, the disaster owed its destructiveness in part to the increased population in the region. So long as the population was relatively sparse, people built homes on higher ground, but as populations grew, more homes were built close to the water, along the flood plain.⁴⁹ Undeniably, the incidents

⁴⁸ IFRC, 'Emergency Appeal,' July 4, 2008.

⁴⁹ LC/MEX/R918, 3 de abril de 2008. Tabasco: Características y impacto socioeconómico de las Inundaciones Provocadas a Finales de Octubre y a Comienzos de Noviembre de 2007 por el Frente Frió Numero 4. At the request of the Tabasco state government, the federal government agreed to field a mission consisting of its own National Center for Disaster Prevention and the Economic Commission for Latin America, with cooperation from BCPR (UNDP), UNICEF, WFP, FAO and PAHO and funding from UNDP. The mission explored the causes and elaborated the extent of damage, presumably setting the agenda for later

affecting the coast of Mexico are related in part to climate change.

On 27 October Mexico's President Felipe Calderon implemented a disaster emergency plan, solicited funds from the Federal Disaster Fund (FONDEN) and activated the Operational Emergency Committee of the state of Tabasco.⁵⁰ Some 8,000 soldiers, 3,000 marines and over 2,000 policemen were deployed to the affected areas, with trucks for relief distributions. Later other national actors in the public and private sector were mobilised. These actions by the federal government bypassed the normal decentralised pattern for disaster response, in which state and departmental officials determine the response in the first instance and, only if needed, call on the federal system. The federal response was needed, but there were, and still are, objections raised about reportedly inadequate consultations preceding the government's call in this matter.⁵¹

The disaster coordinators of international agencies residing in the country were on the scene quickly. On 4 November, in a highly unusual move, the Ministry of Foreign Relations formally requested additional international assistance. OCHA dispatched an UNDAC mission of experts on 6–7 November, which worked from the offices of the Resident Coordinator in UNDP.⁵²

Despite numerous incidents in the country, the government had not made a formal request for comprehensive international disaster assistance since the devastating Mexico City earthquake of 1985. It had been a point of pride that the country's response system could manage disasters, and required international assistance only to complement national efforts on the ground. But when the request came and the international assistance started flowing in, it was complicated precisely because the UN humanitarian presence was almost without precedent. In other disaster-

prevention. Jose Adrián Carabajal Domínguez, 'Las Causas de la Inundación de 2007 en Tabasco,' article of the University of Juarez, Tabasco.

⁵⁰ IFRC, 'DREF Operation Final Report,' MDRMX001, 1 April, 2008. DREF is the Disaster Relief Emergency Fund.

⁵¹ The prestigious academic Center, El Colegio de Mexico has been undertaking an investigation regarding the initiative of the Federal government. Interview, June 25, 2008

⁵² OCHA, 'Mexico: Tabasco and Chiapas Floods OCHA Situation Report No. 2,' November 6, 2007.

prone countries there is a strong presence of NGOs and UN bodies, with longstanding protocols for humanitarian work. Governments and agencies are familiar with one another's *modus operandi*. Agencies are likely to be on the ground already and able to move from where they are working to the site of the disaster, as occurred in Peru and Bolivia. Although most UN agencies and major NGOs were represented in Mexico in 2007, the government lacked experience of working with these organisations, and the two sides had to learn how to work together in a short time and under great pressure.⁵³

Whatever the shortfalls in risk management that exacerbated the floods, state and national response in Mexico proved considerably stronger than in the two cases described above. Indeed, the international community miscalculated the extent to which the Mexican public and private sector would rise to the occasion. International NGOs were the first to arrive, a few days after the call for assistance. The agencies were well experienced and arrived with all the supplies typically needed in such situations. They came directly to the flood areas on tourist visas, without having first negotiated with the Mexican government regarding its priorities. (The IFRC was an exception since its contributions were determined in collaboration with the Mexican Red Cross.⁵⁴) The supplies they brought were, in fact, largely in place or being acquired locally thanks to the efforts of state and federal government entities, private enterprises and civil society groups. Tabasco is an oil-producing area, and the Mexican oil company PEMEX was activated in the response. The government asked NGOs to work primarily in rural areas, where government efforts still had not reached, and the NGOs complied with positive results.

The only UN agencies operating systematically in the realm of disaster management were UNDP and UNICEF. In 2003, when Hurricane Isador struck Yucatan, the Governor of Yucatan had asked UNDP to establish a prevention programme, and told the agency to concentrate on rural areas. Between 2003 and 2007, the prevention programme spread out from Yucatan to other regions. The programme produced risk maps, analyses of vulnerabilities in

⁵³ Interview Javier Moya Garcia, UNDP July 10, 2008

⁵⁴ IFRC, 'DREF Operation: Mexico Floods' Final Report April 2008, GLIDE FL-2007-00154-Mex.

the region and recommendations for public policies related to disaster prevention. In 2007, UNDP was preparing the ground for work in Tabasco when pressed into service to meet the needs of the disaster. Although still not familiar with conditions in Tabasco or Chiapas, UNDP and UNICEF were able to assemble Mexican experts from other places whom they had trained.⁵⁵

The UN system team (not as a cluster) arrived as the flooding assumed major proportions. Like the NGOs, the UN had a list of material resources it was prepared to fund and bring. But it was at once apparent that most of what was needed was already in place, thanks to government funding and private sector support from business and civil society. The UN list grew shorter by the day. Although far less international material assistance than anticipated was actually needed, international expertise and coordination skills were highly important, supporting national and local authorities to ensure that resources reached intended targets. The Mexican system has been able in the past to cope with smaller disasters but the devastation in Tabasco and Chiapas surpassed its organisational capacities.⁵⁶ The international presence was especially important in reaching areas outside of the urban centres, with less government presence.

Mexico still relies on its military for planning and response to major disaster episodes, and invests

inadequately in risk reduction. Since 2007, there is evidence of growing interest on the part of state governments in vulnerable areas in the longer range strategies to prevent disasters and greater willingness to invest in them.⁵⁷ President Calderon created a US\$ 650 million federal fund for reconstruction for the region and reconstruction is under way, albeit slowly. Funding for projects comes largely from the state governments in Tabasco and Chiapas, with contributions from sources in the federal government. UN agencies and USAID also have been funding recovery activities. Reportedly, prevention criteria have been prominent in the planning, as people are mindful of the water management issues that are still problematic in Tabasco. Local experts, in particular, have been urging recovery based on sustainable environmental models.⁵⁸ The American Red Cross is providing technical and financial support to develop a Disaster Operations Centre (DOC) at the Mexican Red Cross headquarters in Mexico City. The goal of the centre is to improve coordination between Mexican Red Cross response actors – national headquarters, field delegations, volunteers – in order to provide more timely and effective relief assistance during emergencies. The establishment of a DOC is also intended to enhance communications and coordination between the Mexican Red Cross and other humanitarian actors, including government agencies and non-governmental organisations.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Interview Javier Moya Garcia.

⁵⁶ According to Moya Garcia, the Mexican system could handle the needs of about 15,000 families, but in Tabasco alone the numbers climbed to around 450,000 families.

⁵⁷ LC/MEX/ R.918, p. 6.

⁵⁸ LC/MEX/ R.918, p. 6.

⁵⁹ Interviews, emails, Shelly Cheatham and Guillermo Garcia, American Red Cross, July 21, 2008.

4. Issues relevant to regional responses

In the preceding discussion several recurring themes relate to how governments in the LAC region have addressed major natural disasters, and how the international humanitarian community has directly responded and/or sought to contribute to better state management of disasters. This author is of the opinion that there is a high level of mutual respect and collaboration between and among regionally based international officials and government entities responsible for disaster management. The majority of regional officials – many of whom are from the area – came to their positions with long experience in the region and sensitivity to its particular needs. Their inter-agency collaboration as well as their interactions with government officials are more fluid than in other parts of the world due to the common Spanish language used by all. There is wide consensus that major improvements are needed for short-term disaster response as well as for the wider considerations of risk reduction, prevention and mitigation. There is also a universally agreed approach – at least at the rhetorical level – that would give priority attention to risk reduction in the disaster management continuum. But evidence of this approach remains weak in practice.

4.1. Obstacles to effective national response and management

4.1.1. *Leadership: the civil defence vs. civil protection model*

State disaster systems operated by Civil Defence units under Defence ministries are focused on the

short-term needs of disaster response, but generally less effective over the long term than systems in which disaster management is coordinated under civilian leadership. This is the common opinion among disaster experts consulted in the Americas region. Governments have opted for a militarised approach because it brings a unified command structure and strong logistical prowess that can remove victims from harm's way quickly. Military leaders do less well in coordinating long-term, broadly based management that includes the risk reduction strategies and recovery planning which the same governments claim to prioritise. The Civil Defence model as applied in the Americas moreover

has serious drawbacks in the several countries that have been subject in recent history to armed military actions against citizens. In all the cases reviewed, there were reports of resentment, sometimes on the part of specific ministries, e.g. health or housing, or on the part of local authorities, who felt their inputs to have been marginalised in the response process.

Whatever the disaster management model adopted, it is important to have greater clarity with regard to the roles of the various actors, national, regional and local. Some of the countries of the Americas, Colombia in particular, and also Jamaica, Ecuador and Bolivia (the last two only for a short time), revised the civil defence model to one with civilian control and based on the concept of 'civil protection' in the face of disaster. The Colombian government has created a Sistema Nacional, in which all agencies, national and international, including the military, are coordinated in a unit that reports directly to the Executive. International agencies are 'partnered' with national counterparts, e.g. water and sanitation projects initiated by outside donors are coordinated with national and regional entities that have responsibility for this sector.

4.1.2. *Paying for disasters*

In Peru, as noted, the government has created but not adequately funded its disaster response system and left recovery projects largely to international funding. In Mexico, Peru and Bolivia, responsibilities for first response lie with local political entities, but regional and local leadership had not been allocated and could not raise funds for disaster response, much less the acknowledged need for risk reduction. Disaster preparedness and prevention projects under way, as well as the salaries of personnel responsible for them, are invariably funded by outside donors directly or with funds channelled through one of the regional organisations (CEPREDENAC, CAPRADE, CDERA) or NGOs. The IDB contributes its expertise to identifying risks and establishing strategies to deal with them, then offers low-cost loans to governments for actual risk reduction projects. The demand has been low.

While the state authorities expect international funding for projects related to disasters, they complain that the projects respond to donor

priorities rather than to state priorities and are not their own initiatives. This may be true to a larger extent than international officials would care to acknowledge, but it is no less true that governments, even poorer governments, have not done as much as they could to fund their own personnel and priorities. In Colombia, contrary to the practices in most countries, when international loans come in, the government provides funding for national counterparts. This kind of arrangement reportedly has facilitated effective international interventions, and outsiders know what there is on the ground and how to get the information they need. One of the major achievements of PAHO is to have salaried disaster management officials in most of the Health Ministries in the region.⁶⁰ This could be replicated in other sectors. Because health ministries have developed disaster capacities, they are able to respond to emergencies in the first instance. In the case of Mexico, PAHO assistance supplemented what had already been achieved locally.

4.1.3. Politics and disasters

In the three cases reviewed, an effective government response to the particular disaster was in some way thwarted by political factors. In Peru, newly elected officials at national and local levels lacked the training, experience and initiative to respond appropriately. Some key people in charge of disasters, moreover, had been hired based on their party loyalty rather than their professional skills (a situation common to many countries). A new decentralisation of political and financial responsibilities in Peru still had not been well absorbed or tested. In Bolivia, regional tensions between lowlands and highlands influenced responses from all parties. Likewise, people in posts requiring disaster expertise had little such expertise. In Mexico, Bolivia and Peru, the political leadership in the affected areas represented different political parties than the central government, causing rivalries among political leaders seeking the limelight and credit for whatever was done.

⁶⁰ PAHO/WHO, <http://www.disaster-info.net/AnnualReport06/documents/preparedness.htm>. p.1; *A Secure and Disaster-Resilient Health Sector in the Americas: Strategic Plan 2008-2012* PAHO/WHO, May 2008, p. 6, 14-15; *Progress Report on National and Regional Health Disaster Preparedness and Response*. CD47/INF/4, 47th Directing Council August 2, 2006.

4.2. Obstacles affecting international contributions to disaster management in LAC

4.2.1. Organisations based in the region

As elaborated above, the regional hub in Panama seems to have proved its worth, but there are concerns among the member agencies of REDLAC that their roles are not fully appreciated in their respective headquarters or by donors. Several interviewees complained of shortfalls in funding, despite increasing activities and, they contend, successes. Their concerns were reported in a Regional Directors Team Meeting held in March 2008,⁶¹ which noted that, while the number of tasks relegated to their offices had grown, they had not received additional funds, staff or technical support to implement the tasks. Regional agency directors (e.g. PAHO, UNICEF) were seeking supplementary outside funding for projects they viewed as important and which in the past their respective headquarters would have underwritten.

UN officials based in the Americas contend that donor funding is difficult to raise because their region is perceived to be wealthy in contrast to Africa and parts of Asia. Africa is indeed poorer and less endowed with trained human resources than Latin America, however intense poverty in the LAC may be. Officials build a strong case for a different line of logic based on cost-effectiveness. Yes, the poorest countries need assistance. On the other hand, investment in the LAC region is more than justified because that region has demonstrated a strong learning curve in the disaster management area⁶² and supporting better management saves money in the long run. Some attributed funding reductions to a (mistaken) tendency among donors and UN agencies to further centralise international activities, and to view regional offices as largely unnecessary extra layers of bureaucracy between central offices and the UN country representatives.

4.2.2. UN humanitarian reform and the Cluster Approach

The international agencies based in the Americas have become leading proponents (or opponents) of aspects of the recent reform efforts among UN and international agencies. In the three quite different cases briefly examined in these pages, governments

⁶¹ 'Summary LAC Regional Directors Team meetings at the Global RDT,' Oslo, 4-6 March 2008.

⁶² Ibid.

that requested global international assistance in the face of major disasters, and welcomed OCHA assessment missions (UNDAC), specifically did not request that the UN system mobilise a cluster approach response.⁶³ While technically it is the responsibility of the country's designated humanitarian coordinator to request the cluster, the government of the country should be agreeable – which they were not in Peru, Bolivia and Mexico. In a fourth country, the Dominican Republic, some of the country and regionally based UN officials also expressed reservations about calling for a cluster approach to help with the devastation caused by Hurricane Noel in October–November 2007. The Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs insisted that the Cluster Approach was needed and appropriate in this instance, but backed down on applying it fully. Without a cluster approach, the letter implied, it might be more difficult to mobilise needed funding from the UN Central Emergency Response Fund. Agreement was reached in the end on launching it in only four sectors.⁶⁴

Why have Latin America's governments not embraced the cluster approach and why have a large number of international officials in the region criticised it as well? In brief, the international leadership based in New York, Geneva and Rome has been troubled –with good reason – by criticism of its chronic lack of coordinated action, fragmented responses and inter-agency competition. The cluster system is designed to address these problems. International officials based in the region and/or with regional responsibilities in LAC region, see things differently. First, inter-agency cooperation has been better in LAC than in many parts of the world. Second, and more important, officials see the governments with whom they work as major interlocutors and consider enhancing government capacities to be essential. The problems reside in the organisational principles of the cluster approach which effectively diminish effective operational collaboration between governments and international disaster officials. The original versions

⁶³ The cluster leadership approach is part of the UN Reform, approved by the Inter Agency Standing Committee. Its purpose is to strengthen the capacity of the UN system and partners to respond to humanitarian emergencies by designating 'cluster leads', or organisations responsible for coordinating inter-agency humanitarian response in specific sectors.

⁶⁴ Letter from November 7 by John Holmes, made available to the author.

of the cluster system had little space for government participation, much less its leadership. Hence, leaders in Panama and the members of UN country teams have shared government reservations about inviting a full cluster team to deal with disasters:

Some disaster-affected governments and experts have expressed reservations regarding a potentially negative impact on national institutions in situations where the humanitarian reform is implemented without consultation or adjustments in the most advanced of developing countries.

The Cluster mechanism is not meant to replace governments, especially in the case of sudden-onset disasters in advanced countries.⁶⁵

PAHO has been the most outspoken among regional entities in criticising the implementation of the cluster approach, but it is far from alone in so doing. PAHO's priority is to strengthen disaster management in the health sectors and especially the ministries of health in the countries where they work. This interest is not served by a UN system that bypasses existing state entities and programmes in an effort to make its own system more efficient. Other UN agencies working in the disaster realm, most notably those concerned with building support for measures of disaster risk reduction (UNDP, ISDR, UNICEF among others) have also found the cluster approach to be less than compatible with their national capacity building efforts.

Objections from the LAC region seem to have had some resonance. A 'Preliminary Guidance Note on Implementation of the Cluster Leadership Approach'⁶⁶ urged coordination with 'all humanitarian partners', including government leaders, and support of government leadership during crises. The specific humanitarian response at the country level, however, made no mention of how this was to be done. A revised Guidance Note of 24 November⁶⁷ was far more explicit in this regard, and is seen as an improvement by many of the early

⁶⁵ PAHO, 'Consultation on Global Humanitarian Trends and their Implications on Institutions in the Americas,' Warrentown Virginia 3-4 April 2008.

⁶⁶ Document provided to the author.

⁶⁷ Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 'Guidance Note on Using the Cluster Approach to Strengthen Humanitarian Response,' November 24, 2007, document made available to the author.

critics in the region. The guidelines for the Humanitarian Coordinator for securing agreement on the establishment of appropriate sectors and sectoral groups and...sector leads.. should be based on a clear assessment of needs and gaps, as well as on a mapping of response capacities, including those of the host Government, local authorities, local civil society, international humanitarian organisations and other actors, as appropriate. (p.5)

The document goes on to insist on the importance of building links with government and local authorities, noting that:

In some cases, Government and local authorities may be in a strong position to lead the overall humanitarian response and the role of the Humanitarian Coordinator may be to organize an international humanitarian response in support of the host Government's efforts. This would typically be the case in disasters. (p.9)

If these modifications in approach were not made in direct response to Latin American objections, they do go a distance in accommodating them. Insofar as countries in the hemisphere have established potentially – albeit flawed – working mechanisms for disaster response, funding mechanisms for early recovery, and incipient programmes for disaster risk reduction and public awareness, they warrant support and strengthening. The national political will to do more may be strengthened by international interventions in which UN sectors correspond to the existing state-determined divisions of responsibility, and are designed to buttress existing structures. The Latin America and Caribbean region is well endowed with human resources and has viable government structures in almost all countries. International disaster response and management efforts will be made more effective in partnership with national expertise and institutions.

5. Recommendations

- Governments in the region can and should invest more of their own resources in disaster management and in support of their own trained disaster experts.
 - Disaster management and demands of development merge in disaster risk reduction. Agencies and organisations working in both realms should give higher priority to this area. (Presently, the theme is marginal to both areas, because it is not perceived as a central concern to either.)
 - Disaster response personnel and officials with technical responsibilities should, as far as possible, be appointed on technical rather than political criteria, their salaries should be paid within fixed ministerial budgets, and their service should not be dependent on electoral changes.
 - Civilian leadership of disaster response and management units should be encouraged in the countries of the region where these functions are still primarily seen as military responsibilities.
 - In disaster-prone countries it is highly desirable to build disaster management expertise into all relevant line ministries and units (health, education, housing, social services, transportation, technology, telecommunications etc.) and to incorporate it into development planning.
 - The concept of a sub-regional organisation that collects and disseminates information, trains local officials and develops plans of action is eminently sensible. The three sub-regional entities are still inadequately staffed and minimally funded, but their influence has increased in national disaster policy making. Member governments in the three LAC regional organisations should contribute more to their successful operations, including with more generous funding. If the member country governments contribute more visibly to these agencies, donors are more likely to follow suit.
 - International regional planning exercises related to disasters should as a matter of course plan these exercises in consultation with government representatives in affected states.
 - Disaster management leadership needs to be supported and professionalised at both national and local levels, with continuing training and updated information. Fortunately for the LAC region, there are entities in place that make training and information available, and these should receive continuing support from international sources.
 - More international funding for disaster management is warranted in the Latin American and Caribbean areas, both on grounds of need and because the region has been in the vanguard of 'lessons learned'. To the extent that lessons actually are 'learned' in terms of response, and disaster management is incorporated into development planning, the consequences of disasters will be less dire and the costs of responding will be lower.
 - The agency 'hub' established in Panama warrants support and is a useful model for other regions.
 - Cluster approach implementation should rigorously adhere to guidelines advising greater coordination, collaboration and deference to national and local authorities and the clusters themselves should complement, not replace, existing divisions of labour.
- The LAC countries differ substantially in their levels disaster preparedness, the resources they are able

or willing to make available to meet the demands of disaster management, and in their respective political contexts. There can be no single approach appropriate for all. Nevertheless, there are regional affinities and promising instances of collaboration between and among states. International donors and agencies aiming to target assistance effectively while building national and regional capacities have an advantage in being able to refer to a wide array of regionally based entities, including organisations that see disaster management in a development context. Devoting resources to building national and regional capacities, however, is difficult at a time when the international community is itself questioning its collective role. It is even more

difficult to persuade donors at a time of shrinking funding to do what virtually all parties insist must be done: (a) to expand resources available for long-term risk reduction programmes; (b) to support long-term sustainable post-disaster recovery, and (c) to incorporate these into development planning that prioritises poverty reduction. But these are not to be considered primarily as international responsibilities. It would almost certainly be easier to pursue these goals if the governments in disaster-prone countries adopted stronger measures in their own planning programmes toward these ends and sought outside support for plans towards which they themselves were devoting resources.

Interviews*

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* Unless otherwise indicated, interviews were conducted by telephone.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

BCPR-Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Disaster Reduction
CADRI – Capacity for Disaster Reduction Initiative
CAPRADE-Andean Committee for Disaster Prevention and Assistance
CARICOM-Caribbean Community and Common Market
CCDN- Joint Command for Natural Disasters (Bolivia)
CDM- Comprehensive Disaster Management
CDERA- The Caribbean Disaster Emergency Committee
CEPREDENAC - Coordination Center for Natural Disaster Prevention
CONRADE- National Council for Risk Reduction and Disaster and Emergency Response
CRID- Regional Disaster Information Center for Latin America and the Caribbean
CRS- Catholic Relief Service
DOC-Disaster Operations Center
DRR- Disaster risk reduction
ECHO- European Commission Humanitarian Aid Office
ECLA- Economic Commission for Latin America
FAO- Food and Agriculture Organization
FONDEN- Federal Disaster Fund
FORSUR- Fund for the Reconstruction of the South
HPG/ODI- Humanitarian Policy Group/Overseas Development Institute
IASC- Inter Agency Standing Committee
IDB- Inter-American Development Bank
IDEA- Instituto de Estudios Ambientales/Institute for Environmental Studies
IFIs-International financial institutions
IFRC- International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
ILO-International Labor Organization
INDECI- National Institute for Civil Defense (Peru)
INEI- Nation Institute for Statistics and Information
IOM-International Organization for Migration
ISDR-International Strategy for Disaster Reduction
LAC- Latin America and Caribbean
MSF- Medecins sans Frontieres
PADRU- Pan American Disaster Response Unit
PAHO- Pan American Health Organization/World Health Organization
PEMEX-Petroleos Mexicanos
REDHUM- Red de Información Humanitaria/ Network of Humanitarian Information
REDLAC- Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Task Force for Risk, Emergency and Disasters
RO-LAC- Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean
SAHIMS- Southern African Human-development Information Management Network for Coordinated Humanitarian & Development Action
SISRADE- System for Risk Reduction and Disaster Emergency Response (Bolivia)
SUMA Suministro de Materiales en Desastres
UNCREF-UN Central Emergency Response Fund
UNDAC-UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination
UNDMT- UN Disaster Management Teams
UNDP/ BCPR- UN Development Program/ Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery
UNEP- UN Environment Program
UNESCO-UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNETE- United Nations Technical Teams for Emergencies
UNFPA- UN Population Fund
UNICEF- UN Children’s Fund

UN/ISDR- UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction
UN OCHA- UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
USAID/OFDA- United States Agency for International Development/ Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance
VIDECICODI-Vice Ministry of Civil Defense and Integral Development



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