

"Torrential and long lasting rainfall led to overflowing of rivers in the lower regions"

# Lessons from the humanitarian response

Summary of unpublished paper\*

François Grunewald presented a paper on lessons learnt from recent disaster responses in Central America at a conference in Paris in March 2002. The paper sets out to analyse the work of humanitarian actors and the impact of their actions in Central America. In order to do this the author examines country context, the impact of different disasters, the nature of programmes implemented, the consequent short, medium and long-term effects, and lessons learnt.

## Context

Central America is extremely diverse in terms of agro-ecology, history, agricultural policies and human resources. The variation in agrarian economies between the three countries affected by recent disasters (El Salvador, Nicaragua and Honduras) has important implications in terms of vulnerability and ability to withstand shocks. Central America has suffered years of damage due to internal conflict. Natural disasters are common in the region but preparedness and mitigation capacity have not been strongly developed. Economies are geared towards export, e.g. coffee production, rendering farmers vulnerable to fluctuations in the international market, as occurred recently following the development of Vietnamese coffee exports.

## Different Impacts of Disasters

Hurricane Mitch had several types of physical effect. Torrential and long lasting rainfall following the hurricane led to overflowing of rivers in the lower regions, mud slippage and land slides in the mountainous regions and tidal waves in the medium altitude areas. These physical events had the following impacts on the region:

- Destruction of inhabited areas including housing (some urban sites like Tegucigalpa and Posoltega and agricultural settlements were completely destroyed).
- Destruction of productive areas including physical infrastructure and economic activities.
- Deforestation and recurrent forest fires in certain mountainous regions leading to significant physical vulnerability of ecosystems
- Destruction of communication infrastructure, limiting economic activities for months after the event.

Although the impact of the two earthquakes in San

Salvador was essentially different to that of Hurricane Mitch, there were a number of common features:

- Agricultural production was barely affected in the short-term since the hurricanes occurred outside of the agricultural seasons. However, in certain regions there may have been a negative impact on the productivity of trees due to weakening effects on roots.
- Marked destruction of urban and peri-urban living and commercial buildings.
- Marked impact on the coffee economy in certain regions.

## Aid Programmes

Aid programmes were geared towards food and economic security measures. These included general rations, food for work, and very occasionally, seeds and tools distributions. Measures were also taken to safeguard assets and relaunch a limited number of micro-finance projects. There was a flood of activities targeted at rural areas but economic support for urban and peri-urban areas was relatively rare and seemed to be a blind-spot for agencies. Furthermore, compared to the African context, there seem to have been very little seeds and tool distributions. Also, delays in implementing programmes sometimes meant that programmes planned following one disaster were only implemented in time for a subsequent disaster to happen. After both Hurricane Mitch and the earthquakes in San Salvador, there were numerous initiatives to resettle people in camps—often far from areas of origin. These 'ascientamentos' were very crowded with little space for privacy and had many associated economic and social problems.

## Impact of assistance

While it is clear that all these responses had visible positive effects in the short-term, medium term impacts were not always considered as much as they might have been.

For example:

- Food aid can have secondary negative effects, e.g. dependence of the population and disincentive to work.
- Programmes involving participation of the community that did not take into account the agricultural seasonal calendar may have had an adverse impact on food production.
- In some cases, rehabilitation programmes involving

population re-settlement deprived people of access to their land or normal places of employment. This led to loss of income and food insecurity resulting in further displacement back towards their place of origin or, in some cases, abroad.

## Lessons learnt

- Considered analysis of disaster affected populations and appropriate responses still remains weak and more probing impact evaluation is required.
- It is critical to take into account seasonal agricultural patterns and economic activities for acute emergency and reconstruction activities as soon as a significant level of participation is required from those affected by the disaster.
- Choosing the location of new settlements must take into account food insecurity and economic impacts of such population movements.
- Micro-finance schemes had been implemented in a number of locations prior to the disasters. These schemes provided excellent entry points into solidarity networks and could have been utilised as a means of channelling cash-flow and aid to the beneficiaries. At best, they were ignored; at worst, they were undermined by initiatives which encouraged dependency thereby weakening the credit and saving ethic that had been nurtured.
- It is vital to re-establish the communication and transport sector as soon as possible following a disaster.
- In the post-disaster period, longer term technical solutions to food insecurity were over-emphasised whilst political initiatives were usually ignored despite their critical relevance. For example, on the steep slopes of the Pacific coast, farmer induced erosion will not be improved through technical measures but by improving access of people to land in the grass-land plains. As long as the latter are used for intensive livestock rearing, recommendations about terraced cultivation on the slopes makes little sense. Ultimately what is needed is a mini-agricultural revolution which depends as much on political will as agricultural know-how.

\*The paper was presented at the Conference "Evaluation for evolution: three years of work in Central America after Mitch and after the Salvadorian earthquakes" in Paris, 28 March 2002. The full report of the conference can be obtained on URD's web site [www.urd.org](http://www.urd.org)