



Strengthening National Systems for Disaster Risk Management after Hurricane Mitch: A Case Study from Nicaragua

case study

Background

Nicaragua has always appeared high on the list of disaster prone countries not only in Latin America but also at a world scale. The disaster risk context has been compounded historically by recurrent problems of conflict and poor governance, leading to a permanent process of social, economic and political struggle for many years. "Natural" disaster is but one more crisis context to add to others.

In October of 1998, Hurricane Mitch hit the Central American region, with a path of destruction that in Nicaragua alone affected over 800,000 people (19 per cent of the population) with over \$900 million in damages, 45 per cent of Nicaragua's GDP. The effects of Mitch brought to light institutional weaknesses flawed development processes, and a generalized perception that natural disasters are unusual, isolated events which require forecasting and fast reaction.

Both the national authorities and UNDP became highly sensitive to the need for improved risk management activities and a change from reactive, response oriented, to prospective risk reduction frameworks. The need for a coherent set of policies and procedures, and a system approach to address decades of risk accumulation and increasing vulnerability amongst the poorest sectors of the population was clearly identified.

The early recovery stage provided an opportunity for improving inter-institutional coordination and involving a greater number of stakeholders to integrate disaster reduction as a permanent activity in the country's development agenda. The Emergency Cabinet, led by the Vice-Presidency, took over control of the situation. UNDP played a significant role in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, supporting damage assessments and early recovery proposals with a local level focus, and facilitating the communication between the Government, civil society and donors.

A Preparatory Assistance project was developed with the support of Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery (BCPR), to facilitate the dialogue around the establishment of a national risk reduction system in Nicaragua. The Preparatory Assistance resulted in the establishment of the National System for Disaster Prevention, Mitigation, and Attention, SINAPRED. Subsequent work with local risk management initiatives and training for System members in the search to consolidate the work of the sectoral, territorial and civil society components contributed to the sustainability of the system in the long run.

Goals and Objectives

To improve the inter-institutional coordination and to integrate disaster reduction as a permanent activity for a wide spectrum of development stakeholders.

To facilitate the establishment of a national risk reduction system in Nicaragua.

To develop a legal framework to regulate the various sectors' participation in risk management on a permanent basis, within the development framework and not only in post-event situations.

Activities Developed

A key concern from the early stages was to ensure support to the initiative from all stakeholders. On the government's side, support was found at the Vice-Presidency level. Support was also provided by the UN Resident Coordinator, as well as through technical expertise. A full-time UNDP advisor was assigned to the project.

With the motto 'Building a culture of prevention' and led by the Vice-Presidency, more than 300 people gathered from ministries, municipalities, universities, civil society, and international organizations, to sign the 'Declaración de Managua', which outlines the main elements of a national risk management

proposal. The incipient disaster management unit in the Vice-Presidency, along with institutions with more extensive experience in this area such as the Civil Defense, INETER, CEPREDENAC National Committee, and various non-governmental organizations, were summoned to work in partnership. Each Ministry and government institution designated a focal point and a preparatory workshop was conducted to develop the national risk reduction programme. The programme was launched by the Vice President in June of 1999.

The current legal framework was systematically reviewed with a special focus on the roles and responsibilities of the various levels of government, municipalities, private sector, and citizens. Which was submitted to the National Legislative Assembly.

As a result of this Preparatory Assistance and in close collaboration with the National Assembly, the law number 337 was approved in April of 2000, establishing the national system for disaster response, mitigation, and prevention. This is considered the most advanced proposal for risk reduction in the region today. SINAPRED and its Executive Secretariat, the implementing system for the new legislation, respond directly to the Presidency of the Republic. This process, which was widely supported in the country, led to a successful negotiation with donors for the financing of the National Risk Reduction Programme.

Important Achievements

In less than a year, and with scarce financial resources, Nicaragua endorsed a new legal and institutional framework for disaster reduction.

The permanent support provided by the UN Resident Coordinator and the technical backstopping provided by UNDP led to the establishment of an *ad hoc* institutional model for natural disaster risk reduction in Nicaragua.

Lessons Learned and Challenges

In the aftermath of a large-scale disaster such as Hurricane Mitch, the UNDP Country Office was able to seize the awareness created in government and civil society to promote the

establishment of key reforms to the national system for disaster risk reduction.

A strong commitment of high levels of government and the UNDP Country Office was crucial in reaching the objectives.

Clear advice and guidance in the process backstopped by sound technical expertise, and the commitment of the staff involved also facilitated the process.

A holistic approach involving different territorial levels and different stakeholders was one of the main factors in the success of this experience.

The main challenge was determining how to get traditional soloist concert players to play together as an orchestra. Essentially, the process of establishing *effective* teamwork among stakeholders - with appropriate coordination levels to sustain disaster reduction as a permanent activity in the development process in the country, was considered a major challenge.

Recommendations

To promote coherence amongst sectoral and territorial levels.

To continue with the disaster risk reduction mainstreaming, ensuring that appropriate information about disaster risk is available and factored in all aspects of the decision-making process and that appropriate measures to manage and reduce risks are included in development programmes.

To increase capacities of the government and in civil society through appropriate training programmes and regulatory measures, as well as the establishment of indicators to measure progress on disaster risk reduction.

For Information Contact:

Angeles Arenas, Regional Disaster Reduction Advisor, LAC region
United Nations Development Programme, BCPR
E-mail: angeles.arenas@undp.org

Further Information

SINAPRED: <http://www.sinapred.gob.ni>
UNDP Nicaragua: <http://www.undp.org.ni/>

December, 2004