

**DISASTER MITIGATION IN A SOCIAL VACUUM
THE ALTO MAYO EARTHQUAKE, PERU, MAY 1990**

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Authors Note

A new turn of events overtook the writing of the present paper before its conclusions were properly finished and articulated. This draft of the paper was written in late March 1991, ten months after an earthquake struck the Alto Mayo region of Perú. It describes the experiences of the Alto Mayo Reconstruction and Development Plan; a planning instrument formulated and implemented by Tecnología Intermedia (IT Peru). On the 4th April 1991, two further earthquakes affected the Alto Mayo repeating the sequel of deaths, injuries and homeless families experienced in 1990. The new disaster effectively ends one chapter of the Plan and begins another. It is too soon after the event to incorporate into the paper any serious analysis of the impact of the new disaster in the region. However, the April 1991 disaster should be considered as an evaluation of the different reconstruction and mitigation measures implemented in the Alto Mayo and thus of what we put forward here. Without that evaluation any conclusions reached in the paper are strictly provisional. In the coming weeks, it will be necessary to rewrite a definitive version which takes account of both the 1990 and 1991 disasters.

Introduction

In a country where the word disaster has become synonymous with the state of the economy and of society in general it might seem perverse and irrelevant to focus our attention on a small earthquake in a remote part of the jungle. The Alto Mayo region, like most of the Peruvian Amazon has been systematically ignored in the official version of Peru's history and has little or no prominence in the country's political and economic life. If it wasn't for the spread of coca plantations, the actions of armed groups and the impact of the earthquake of the 29th May 1990, it is improbable that the Alto Mayo would figure prominently in the national imagination at all.

However, while the concept of disaster in Peru expands to engulf even family and personal relationships, it is essential not to lose sight of the lessons that we can learn from so-called natural disasters. Because, at the same time as the dividing line between disaster and society in Perú becomes fuzzier, an analysis of the causes and impact of the disasters and of experiences of disaster mitigation can be very useful. Perhaps, from the specificity of a natural disaster we can project outwards lessons valid for the ever elusive reconstruction of society as a whole.