



Secretariat
Boulevard du Régent, 58/10
B-1000 Bruxelles
Belgique
Phone 322.502.43.33
Fax 322.502.82.02
E-mail careci2@ibm.net

CARE INTERNATIONAL'S PERSPECTIVE

On the Transformation of Central America following hurricane Mitch

1 Introduction

Hurricane Mitch was one of the most devastating storms in the history of the Americas. It ravaged Central America, leaving in its wake death, destruction of people's homes and livelihoods, and heavily damaged infrastructure and social services. It set back the progress in economic growth made by Central American countries during recent years, put at risk their progress in democratization and underscored the need for better natural resources management.

Although Honduras and Nicaragua sustained the worst damage, neighboring El Salvador and Guatemala also experienced serious damage and loss of life. Approximately 10,000 Central Americans are reported dead and 8,000 missing. Entire villages were buried by mudslides or swept from the banks of rivers. Hundreds of thousands of people were left homeless. All told, more than 2.3 million people suffered direct or indirect consequences from Hurricane Mitch. Estimates of material losses and damages exceed \$5 billion.

Poor people, by and large, have suffered most from Mitch, because without insurance or money to pay for emergency medical care or home repairs or rebuilding, they have limited capacity to withstand and recover from shocks of the magnitude of this storm. This limited capacity is the result of decades of inequitable distribution of resources that has left poor families marginalized and disenfranchised.

While Hurricane Mitch was a terrible disaster, it also presents an opportunity to transform this historic inequity. The challenge facing Central American countries in the aftermath of Mitch is not only to rebuild their physical and economic infrastructure but also to undertake the longer term reweaving of the social fabric for a more equitable recovery and lasting prosperity.

It is the moment to seize new opportunities to create a different future, rather than try to rebuild the past. There is a chance to transform Central America.

To date, the international community has committed significant financial, material and human resources to assist host governments and civil society in their efforts to begin the task of "transforming" Central America. CARE believes that such support must continue over the medium- to long-term and that this support must not only target those affected by Mitch but take into consideration all marginalized and disenfranchised populations. Only through a long-term

and socially inclusive commitment can the international community hope to effectively contribute to building societies that incorporate all of the people of Central America.

2 CARE's Guiding Principles

CARE reaffirms its commitment to improving the quality of life of poor people in Central America regardless of their ethnic origin, political affiliation, religious beliefs, age or gender. To guide our response to Hurricane Mitch, CARE sets out the following principles that will guide the design, implementation and evaluation of our programming efforts in the Central American countries where we operate – El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua.

- 2.1 All efforts will support the transformation process.** CARE understands that the transformation process is a long-term undertaking and implies fundamental changes in the region's economic and social infrastructure. Therefore, our commitment is long-term and all of CARE's programs will contribute to the transformation of Central America. We urge the international community, local governments and civil society in general to direct their respective efforts towards supporting the transformation process by stimulating economic growth, correcting social inequities, and managing environmental conservation. Above all, CARE calls upon local governments to redouble their efforts to address the economic, social and environmental root causes of poverty and to embrace lasting solutions to inequity in Central America. Addressing these root causes must be an essential part of all long-term development plans.
- 2.2 Municipalities, local authorities, and civil society will be the primary focus of our interventions.** Local empowerment is crucial to an effective and sustainable transformation of the region. Local authorities and civil society are in the best position to determine local priorities, and they are important building blocks of democracy in countries striving to establish democratic political processes. CARE will seek to strengthen the capacity of these groups to represent their constituencies and to take responsibility for their long-term development. CARE will advocate for national policies aimed at empowering and enabling these groups to contribute effectively to the transformation process. The international community should direct its support to this grassroots level.
- 2.3 Citizens participate in their democratic and development decision-making processes.** It is essential that those sectors of the population that have traditionally been marginalized and disenfranchised become actively engaged in the transformation process. By incorporating all citizens in decision-making, Central American governments will change the way business has been conducted in the past, and create a social fabric and a political environment conducive to long-term development and prosperity. Engaging the full participation of its citizens, especially those who suffer marked inequities such as minorities and women, should be of highest priority for the Central American countries. CARE will promote and support initiatives to bring this about.
- 2.4 The transformation process requires the inclusion of all social strata.** It is necessary to break down the politics of exclusion that have dominated in Central America for decades.

Reducing - and eventually eliminating - poverty cannot be achieved without incorporating all those who are part of the problem as well as those affected by it. All social strata—those who are wealthy, the middle classes and the poor—should be engaged in identifying and benefiting from the solutions. CARE will aim to raise the awareness, concern, understanding and involvement of all social strata to work together toward mutual benefit today and for future generations.

3 CARE's Perspective on the Challenges Facing the Transformation process in Central America

The international community is mobilizing a multi-billion dollar response to Central America's plight in the wake of Hurricane Mitch. There have been several successes related to the emergency relief effort over the last four months. Among them:

- a. Different parts of Central America – which were fragmented by the destruction of roads, bridges, and other infrastructure – have been reconnected, even if by temporary repairs or makeshift solutions. Many communities are repairing the feeder roads into their areas, as well as schools, clinics and other public facilities.
- b. Tens of thousands of Mitch-affected people were accommodated in makeshift shelters, such as schools, churches, etc. and provided with food, clean water, medicine and sanitation. Thousands of hurricane survivors constructed temporary shelters and supported their neighbors.
- c. Through preventive education, fumigation, and emergency sanitation measures, there have been no epidemics and the spread of infectious diseases has been controlled.

While important relief was provided to those in need, the recent response has raised some very practical and immediate issues. There is a danger that temporary responses will become quasi-permanent solutions. The underlying factors that sustain poverty in Central America must be examined before embarking in long-term interventions. As the emergency response shifts to rehabilitation and development initiatives, CARE believes it is imperative that the international community, national and local governments, national and international NGOs agree and adhere to a common set of principles to help create lasting solutions to the root causes of poverty in Central America.

CARE believes that the international community needs to:

1. Promote and encourage the capacity of the Central America governments to take a holistic approach which addresses multiple and interdependent social, political and economic issues.
2. Support not only reconstruction of physical infrastructure but also investment in social infrastructure.
3. Allocate resources not only for those directly affected by Mitch but also for all marginalized and disenfranchised populations of Central America.
4. Ensure transparency and accountability for the use of resources made available to support the transformation process in Central America.
5. Ensure their programs and policies are grounded in a solid understanding of local conditions and priorities and will build local capacities.

CARE believes that the governments of Central America countries need to:

1. Guarantee transparency in the allocation of and full accountability for the use of all resources placed at their disposition in support of the transformation process.
2. Ensure that social infrastructure will receive as much attention as the physical/economic infrastructure.
3. Promote and support the involvement of all sectors of the population in identifying and carrying out solutions to the root causes of poverty.
4. Ensure the adequate allocation of resources and delegate the authority for utilization of these resources to municipal governments and those working in close alliance with municipal governments.
5. Revise, create, strengthen and support policies and laws that will stimulate the involvement of civil society and municipalities in the transformation process.
6. Promote and support the inclusion of municipal governments, local authorities and civil society in the planning, decision-making and management of solutions to their problems.
7. Promote and pursue cross-border initiatives and cooperation to address issues that are relevant to more than one country.

CARE believes that national and international NGOs need to:

1. Urge international donors to follow through on their commitments and provide the necessary level of resources for the transformation of Central America.
2. Coordinate their efforts to avoid duplication and provide the greatest possible benefit to the people they are trying to help.
3. Jointly advocate for the national governments in Central America to create an environment that enables civil society to flourish and be an integral part of the transformation process.
4. Strengthen the capacity of civil society to engage in constructive dialogue with governments for the reshaping of Central America.
5. Truly represent the common interest of all regardless of their ethnic origin, political association, religious beliefs, age or gender.

This is not a time for business as usual. It is a time for some fundamental rethinking in each of the affected countries about their commitment to national integration and development. For Central America as a whole, it is a time for rethinking about stronger, mutually reinforcing relations.

CARE believes in and is committed to taking bold and creative steps to ensure the transformation process in Central America. While we appreciate the contribution that each organization and agency can bring to the transformation process, we acknowledge that no one key player can, by itself, make a lasting difference for the people of Central America. For its part, CARE will promote, encourage and participate in a collective approach that supports the entry of Central America into the new millenium with a renewed commitment toward sustainable development and prosperity.

- **Virginia Ubik**
Regional Director
Regional Management Unit for Latin America
Tel (404) 681 4579 ext. 185
Fax (404) 589 2628
Email: ubik@care.org
- **Mario Lima**
Deputy Regional Director
Regional Management Unit for Latin America
Tel (404) 681 4579 ext. 361
Fax (404) 589 2628
Email: lima@care.org