

MUNICIPAL DEVELOPMENT OF LA PAZ, BOLIVIA



Photo: PAIDOWAK

In 1988, the Municipality of La Paz, Bolivia, with assistance from the World Bank, designed a Municipal Development Project to strengthen administrative capacity and solve the problems of infrastructure and natural disasters in this capital, located in the Andes at an altitude of 3,630 meters. Every year this city of more than one million inhabitants, located in a valley surrounded by very steep slopes, suffers serious consequences from mudslides and floods brought on by rain. The population of La Paz grows at approximately 5% a year and is under enormous pressure to find areas suitable for human settlements.

The Project attempts to overcome the shortcomings in infrastructure and services that contribute to rapid erosion and chronic landslides, to strengthen the municipal government, and to encourage, through education and public information programs, local participation in disaster mitigation. The component of disaster management was based on the Urban Development Plan of La Paz, produced by a team of ecogeologists and urban planners, with the assistance of the French government in the late 1970s.

Based on the analyses of disasters that occurred over the last 10 years and on the probability that severe disasters will occur again, the project team recommended mitigation and prevention measures, as well as priorities for investment, which are being implemented at present.

Among the major achievements of the Project, the following stand out:

- A notable trend toward the reduction of floods and landslides in the city;
- The creativity of the municipality in directing and carrying out these projects;
- Complementary environmental programs financed by the IDB, the European Community, the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ), and JICA.

Source: World Bank, 1994.



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Disaster mitigation measures are especially important for buildings sited in densely-populated areas, or for those housing critical facilities

Photo: Fernandez, ULTRA

to face disasters with a "response" mentality alone, their budgets cannot sustain it, and the social cost of disasters has helped to heighten the public's awareness of the problem. Making mitigation a fundamental part of disaster management is irreversible.

Reflecting on the advances, obstacles, and setbacks in the area of natural disaster mitigation, we can identify the following priorities at both the national and regional levels:

- National and international financial institutions should incorporate the variable "natural hazard" in feasibility studies for new investment projects. A regional meeting is being planned at which international financial organizations, bilateral agencies, and country representatives will discuss this concern and formulate a common approach for the protection of investments in the social and health sectors.
- Developing countries must include plans to reduce vulnerability to natural disasters in their requests for support from the international community. In the case of the Caribbean, for example, these plans should receive more attention and visibility in the negotiations with the European Community within the framework of the Lomé Conventions.
- Planners and scientists should play a more active role to influence senior political officials and thus strengthen disaster mitigation.
- The active participation of insurance and reinsurance companies in the national IDNDR Committees should be promoted. These companies have enormous potential as sources of incentives for making prevention and mitigation measures more attractive to the governmental and the commercial private sector and to owners of private dwellings.
- The efforts by PAHO/WHO and other regional agencies in the training and sensitization of administrators, engineers, and architects should be expanded with the leadership of professional associations.
- Most importantly, communities pressing for political decisions that take hazards into account will result in a renewed effort to educate the public, with the constructive participation of the mass media. Thus, the entire motivational potential of the IDNDR will serve as a catalyst for broad dissemination of the concept of the integrated management of natural hazards. ♦