

**POLITICAL RESPONSES TO FLOOD DISASTER:  
THE CASE OF RIO DE JANEIRO, 1988**

Author: Elizabeth Allen  
Workshop:

Institution: Institute of Latin American Studies,  
University of Glasgow  
Address: 69 Oakfield Avenue, Glasgow G12 8QH,  
Scotland, United Kingdom

**1. INTRODUCTION**

The summer rains in February, 1988, caused the worst flood disaster in the state of Rio de Janeiro for twenty years. At the beginning of the month, eight days of rain had deposited eleven inches of water - twice the normal amount - in the area around Petrópolis, in the mountains to the north of the city of Rio de Janeiro, where 149 people were killed and 3,466 made homeless. (Guardian 11th February, 1988: Glasgow Herald 11th February 1988).

The rain stopped for Carnival, but then started again on the 19th February. In nine hours, eight inches of rain fell on the hillsides and city streets of Rio de Janeiro. Torrents of water set in motion landslips, mudslides, and cascades of water-borne rubbish. Loose rocks and retaining walls fell onto houses and streets below, so that roads became impassable. In the month of February, 277 people were killed, 735 injured, and 22,590 made homeless (Senhor 29 February, 1988).

While flooding, on this scale, threatens the whole population to some degree, it attacks most fiercely, the communities of the poor, particularly the favelados or shanty-town dwellers, who have little protection either individually or collectively. Ignored by most state governments in the past, in terms of care or investment, and with few alternatives open to them, the ravages of such disasters strike hardest at the tenuous grip which these poor people have on survival.

While the inheritance of poverty and deprivation amongst the vast, and growing numbers of the poor in the city of Rio de Janeiro is largely attributable to the policies of rapid economic growth under the military - led regimes from 1964-1985, the political responses to the flooding in 1988 suggest little hope for improvement in the living conditions of the poor (Allen, 1985: Allen, 1988).

This paper looks explicitly at the responses made by politicians at federal, state, and municipal level to the damage, death and homelessness caused by the flood disaster of 1988 in Rio de Janeiro. As in so many other disaster cases, the help given to the victims was of short-term relevance and duration, with the longer-term problems of inequality and vulnerability to future floods remaining unresolved.

## 2. THE FLOODS OF FEBRUARY 1988

During the month of February, the Civil Defence Co-ordination of the city of Rio de Janeiro recorded 3,104 cases of housing collapse; 1,950 landslides and rockfalls; 636 floods; and over 300 other rain induced occurrences, such as fallen trees, electricity lines brought down, and broken water tanks. The scale of the disaster is only too apparent when one realises that this small department normally deals with just 200 accidents a year, usually when houses collapse through lack of technical or financial resources to put up a substantial building. The 'Summer Plan', designed by the Civil Defence, was simply unable to cope with this scale of disaster.

Six main areas of the City were affected: Santa Teresa, Tijuca, Salgeiro, Botafogo, Praca Bandeira, and Jardim Botânico. In low-lying areas, water at times reached a depth of 1.5 metres: people clung to lamp posts or waded in human chains along submerged streets. The depth of water, in places, prevented salvage vehicles and ambulances getting to disaster areas: firemen at the Praca Bandeira were themselves flooded and their vehicles immobilized. The total complement of men at the station is just 1,000 men, yet, between 5 pm on Friday and 8 am on Saturday 20th February, they received 800 telephone calls for help.

In many places, public services collapsed completely. There was no electric light, no piped water, and no telephone service. Sewage pipes burst, releasing disease-laden water into the streets. It was a chaotic situation, where high tension power cables lay broken on the ground or in water, buildings were destroyed by falling rock, rubble, and other buildings, gas pipes were broken and highly inflammable gas could be smelt on the air. The Avenida Brasil, the main route in and out of the city, was filled with water, as canals in the area, filled with rubbish and debris and lacking municipal inspection and clearance, overflowed. Storm drains to take away water were blocked, sometimes permanently by local residents, and the highway was flooded for over seven hours.

An assessment of the damage caused in human terms was carried out by the Municipal Secretariat of Social Developments (SMDS) from the 2-4th March 1988. This showed that 174 communities had been badly affected by flooding, involving 2,131 homeless families (about 10,032 people in total, 47% under 14 years of age). Since many other people took shelter with friends and neighbours, the real total of people affected by the 1988 floods must be very much higher. (Oliveira and Sydenstricker, 1988).

The homeless were looked after in 121 official shelters. Most of the homeless classified by this survey were from the low income settlements of the city, where 82% earnt less than two minimum wages a month (the official level of 'absolute poverty' in Brazil (see Allen 1985), confirming the widely held belief that the poor suffer most in disasters such as this. Even by December 1988, over 3,000 people were still homeless (Christian Science Monitor 19-25 December 1988) from the floods, many living in tents of plastic or joining the homeless population which lives, eats and sleeps on Rio's streets.

Both the state governor, Wellington Moreira Franco, and the Mayor of the município and the city of Rio de Janeiro, Roberto Saturnino Braga, acknowledged the chaotic effect of the flooding. Braga stated that 'it is as though a giant has stepped on the city'. Some reporting was severely critical of the rescue organisation in the city, claiming, for example, lack of cooperation between Civil Defence and the Navy (Veja 24th February 1988). Other critics stressed the inadequacy and apparent 'disorder' shown by on-the-spot television reporting. (Leite 1988).

As we have already seen, the Civil Defence had established a Summer Plan, but, due to the scale of the disaster, could not cope. Help also came from the Navy, using rescue vehicles, inflatable boats, and water pumps, working with both Civil Defence and firebrigades. Naval men helped volunteer groups in rescuing victims, transporting medicines and foodstuffs, while naval helicopters localized critical points for assistance (Revista Maritima Brasileira April/June, 1988).

The municipal secretariat for Social Development (SMDS) had already, between January 1987 and February 1988, identified 223 settlements (a total of over 26,948 houses) which were in danger from landslips (114), flooding (79), disease (8), and other kinds of hazard. This list had been compiled by assessment of data and interviews in Iplan - Rio (Institute of Municipal Planning for Rio de Janeiro), the Civil Defence, the Directorate of Geotechnics, the Pastoral de Favelas of the Archdiocese of Rio de Janeiro, and the State Secretary of Land Rights. One year later, a Brazilian

journalist was to note that 30,000 houses continued to be in areas of high risk (Journal do Brasil 19 February, 1989). The disaster had come, and gone, and little, it seems, had been improved.

During the crisis in February the homeless of Rio were a substantial proportion of an estimated total of 60,000 people made homeless by flooding all over Brazil, but the disaster in Rio received more news coverage than, for example, the widespread flooding in Rio Branco in the state of Acre. One consistent theme for the root cause of the flooding is deforestation, whether it be of the Amazon area or the Atlantic Coastal Forest, which leaves greater surface run-off and increased risk of landslip and floods.

When the news of the flood disaster in Rio was broadcast, donations, food, and clothing were sent in from all over Brazil, while funds, equipment and short-term aid came from the USA, Spain, Japan, Norway, and Great Britain. The *Legião Brasileira de Assistência*, the Brazilian Legion for Social Welfare, which is part of the Ministry of Social Welfare, came to the assistance of flood victims helping to store and distribute aid. (Revista Marítima Brasileira 1988).

Whatever help was given, the floods of February 1988 showed quite emphatically that the nature of urban development and the whole economic and political situation of the poor make them most vulnerable to such disasters (Allen, 1989: Guarany 1988). In the end, the main help for the poor, even in the short term, is to help themselves.

The disaster also showed how urgently priority needed to be given to better housing, the retention of mountain slopes, and efficient flood control. It also underlined, unambiguously, that the disaster was considerably greater than the emergency services could handle, pointing to a need for substantial rethinking of their role and for urgent action in the future. What, then, is the political context of the flooding, and how did it effect both short and long, term decision-making?

### 3. THE POLITICAL CONTEXT AND RESPONSES

At the time of the flooding, the economic and political situations in both the city and state of Rio de Janeiro were in turmoil. The município was well on the way to bankruptcy, with a deficit that was forecast to reach CZ\$60 billion by the end of 1988 (Veja 21 September, 1988:32, Larr-Brazil 20 October 1988).

Rio was not alone in this; since other municípios which are state capitals, were also declared bankrupt in the same period (Isto ~~Senhor~~ 18 January, 1989), but the damage caused by the rains produced a demand by Mayor Braga for CZ\$15-20 billion from the federal budget, to carry out flood protection schemes, reforest mountainsides, and repair streets and drains in Rio.

At the state level, Governor Franco claimed CZ\$22-27 billion from federal funds, to build an overflow channel in the northern metropolitan area and carry out protection schemes in the areas of Caxias and Petrópolis, where severe damage had occurred in the first phase of flooding in February 1988. Franco had refused to support President Sarney in his application for an extra, fifth, year in office, when this was put to the Constituent Assembly in Brasília. Consequently, he was excluded from federal support and funding (Flynn 1978, Allen 1988), the claim by Governor Franco for funds was, therefore, weak.

Relations between the Mayor and the Governor, at this time, were strained. They not only belonged to different political parties, but also differed sharply in their attitude and approach to housing policies for the poor. Mayor Braga supported a policy of favela upgrading and community co-operation, while Governor Franco had closed down the previous governor's programmes to upgrade low-income settlements and sort out land rights (Allen 1988b). His policy was strict, and often violent, using the police ostensibly to curb drug trafficking and criminality. For these reasons, it was unlikely that the governor would, or could, help the mayor search for funds to start rebuilding Rio.

At the federal level, President Sarney was afraid even to visit the scene of the flood disaster. On a previous visit, a personal rather than an official one, his bus had been stoned by demonstrators and the President was humiliated and frightened. It required the intervention of a wealthy media magnate, Roberto Marinho of O Globo, to persuade Sarney just to go to Rio and skim over the devastated area in a helicopter, avoiding any contact with the people.

On his return flight to Brasilia, Sarney took Mayor Braga back with him, pointedly leaving Governor Franco at the airport terrace in Rio. He told Braga of funding to the município of CZ\$1.8 billion (about US\$2.3 million), with promises of even more money (Senhor 29 February, 1988).

Governor Franco was left waiting for resources. Only after a major commercial bank, Bradesco, offered US\$1 million for disaster recovery could Marinho persuade Sarney to release, reluctantly US\$500,000, (Senhor 29 February 1988).

By the end of 1988, money from the World Bank and the Caixa Econômica Federal, about US\$156 million, was available for protection works, with further loans from the Caixa available to build retaining walls on the hillsides, carry out road and street repairs, and better drainage systems. The SMDS presented an emergency programme to the World Bank to resettle families in areas of risk and disease, aimed at 7,000 families in 43 communities, in May 1988. This programme also incorporated three schemes of Riourbe, the Municipal Urbanization Company, into the proposal, which was approved, with praise for its presentation, in 100 days (Benjamin, 1988), and was signed in June 1988.

The Brazilian authorities at the federal level were unable to deal with the programme with similar speed and flexibility. From December 1988, some US\$175 million was made available by the World Bank for work in the state capital and five municípios of the state of Rio de Janeiro. The project was not, however, made operative, because, at the federal level, the Caixa Econômica Federal failed to inject its share of the scheme, some US\$175 million. Projects delayed in this way are subjected to a fine by the World Bank of 0.75% a year, or in this case, about US\$109 thousand a month. The amount of fine paid by Brazil in 1988, US\$35 million, would have been enough to build 9,000 houses for the poor, of 35 square meters each (Journal do Brasil 12th June 1989; Veja 16th November 1988, Journal do Brasil 31st January, 1989).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The flood disaster in Rio de Janeiro in February 1988 presents many of the characteristics of 'natural' disasters in developing countries. The fact that the disaster strikes hardest at the poor, unprotected by insurance for their life, its work of house building; without social security for protection against loss of income or employment; prone to disease and trauma, which they cannot pay to alleviate; and subject, in the longer term, to their own devices to build their lives again.

In the short term, media coverage clearly raised awareness, at national and international level, of the plight of the city of Rio. Support from individuals and foreign governments for immediate aid, was quickly forthcoming. In the long term, when the shock is forgotten and the disaster is no longer news in the press and on the television, the process of recovery depends, more than ever, on the process of political bargaining and strategy, and on individual initiative.

The flood disaster in Rio occurred at a difficult time in terms of the national economy, with President Sarney, the first civilian in office since João Goulart from 1961-1964, ostensibly struggling to promote a 'New

Republic, and to balance an international debt of US\$115 billion and an ever increasing public deficit. Isolated in terms of his position, frightened for his public safety, and on the way to becoming perhaps the most unpopular President ever in Brazil, the plight of the poor in the flood disasters seemed not to touch him at all.

Campaigning to protect the interests of landed and capitalist groups, who supported his administration, in the formulations of the Constituent Assembly, the appeal of state governor Franco for funds to protect and repair flood damage made little impression, as long as Franco failed to support Sarney wholeheartedly. Even the refusal to release funds to the Caixa Econômica Federal, to match World Bank money, appeared to be a deliberate hindrance to the work needed to be done in the state of Rio de Janeiro. As one newspaper in November, 1988, reported "the rainy season is here and the city is still not prepared to meet it" (Visão, 16 November, 1988).

Mayor Braga, already in severe financial difficulties, had, at one level, better access to funds from the federal government for some improvements and flood protection in the city area: the rest of the state depended on funds coming to the governor of Rio de Janeiro. Options, at the same time, were constricted. Care needed to be exercised that suggestions to relocate the homeless in new estates outside the main city area were not seen by the poor population as, a return to the mass remocões, or typical of the removals carried out under the repressive military-led régime, especially during the period 1968 to 1974, when 80 favelas were pulled down, 26,193 houses destroyed, and 139,218 people relocated. On many of their old sites, new apartment blocks went up to support land speculation and house the wealthy. (Valladares, 1978; Allen 1989). The fear of remoção is still a constant one among the favelados of the city.

The bottom line of a flood disaster such as this in Rio de Janeiro lies with the poor themselves. Political responses, like the election campaigns of so many politicians, are seen as statements for immediate consumption. The real, practical, responses in terms of rebuilding for those affected by the 1988 floods lie in their own hands, their own endurance, and their own fortitude. Survival and recovery depend on the ability of the poor to pick themselves up from nothing, at great sacrifice and in a daily struggle, to build their lives over again. Until the political system acts with some consideration for the poor in Brazil, the poor will probably just have to continue with their own, however, inadequate, defences against another such flood disaster.

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