

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

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**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).