



## Reflections from Bolivia: When Prevention Becomes The Top Priority

**Marco Antonio Rodríguez, Guido Doria Medina**

Between December 2000 and March 2001, Bolivia suffered the worst floods and droughts in recent memory, forcing the government to declare a Disaster Zone in five of the nine departments (provinces) of the country and request a US\$10 million loan from the Central Bank of Bolivia to respond to the catastrophe.

The floods were the result of precipitation levels not seen by the National Meteorological and Hydrological Service in 50 years, reaching as high as 22 mm/h. Aggravated by the lack of prevention policies and strategies, the floods destroyed homes and crops, damaged roads to the point that several towns were left incommunicado, and severely affected other public infrastructure. In one town alone, Viacha, 35 Km away from La Paz, 300 families were affected, and many lost their homes entirely.



Ironically, meanwhile, drought was ravaging other departments, also ruining crops and deepening the economic crisis already most strongly felt in the country's rural areas, to the point that some of these areas have plummeted to human development levels only comparable to those of some African countries.



So far, 74 have died, 60,000 families have been affected, some 12,000 hectares of crops have been lost at a cost of US\$127 million, and total losses for the country are estimated at US\$700 million—around 10% of GDP. A fuller assessment of the direct and indirect impact of the disasters is underway with the assistance of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).

Summer in Bolivia is the rainy season. Given events in recent years, it might as well be called the disaster season.

Some municipalities, such as La Paz, the country's capital, have a disaster reduction plan with its own annual budget. It becomes active every year in October with a mass media campaign aimed at changing the cultural misperception that disasters are caused by external, sometimes even supernatural, forces. In spite of the Plan, landslides continue to occur in slopes where informal settlements are built

without proper wastewater management systems. The soil's capacity to handle excess water collapses due to the vast quantity of solid waste that ends up in rivers, effectively damming them and increasing the already high levels of vulnerability.

On 26 October 2000, during a conference on risk management that brought together several governmental and international agencies, the Risk Reduction and Disaster Response Act was officially signed. The Act, developed with the assistance of international consultants, is based on a modern conception of disasters and, above all, on the experience of other countries that have faced similar processes.



The Act opens up a new stage in the interpretation of natural disasters by the Bolivian state, involving institutions that until now have not had any role in risk management or disaster response. It sets some basic principles, among them the obligation of the population as a whole to remain vigilant and act preventively, as well as the notion that those who generate risks must pay for the economic consequences. Disaster prevention and response is decentralized to the departmental and local levels, and the linkages between risk management, sustainable development, land-use management, and public investment are clearly set out.

The Andean Development Agency (CAF), at the request of its five member states, launched in October 2000 the Regional Risk Prevention and Mitigation Program (PREANDINO, see also p. 40-42). Its objectives include supporting member countries in the development of National Risk Prevention and Mitigation Plans. In Bolivia, the design of the Plan has been entrusted to the Ministry of Sustainable Development and Planning as a way of implementing the new law and transforming the passive "relief mentality" that prevailed in the past. It also assigns responsibility for the different stages of the disaster cycle to two different institutions: risk reduction will be the responsibility of the Ministry of Planning, while disaster and emergency response will be the responsibility of the National Civil Defense Service, part of the Ministry of National Defense.

The Plan incorporates prevention and mitigation into all processes related to planning, the development of standards, and the monitoring of the health, housing, farming, transport, communications, and energy sectors.

In implementing this new vision of risk management, the Ministry of Sustainable Development and Planning has set out certain core issues: the ability of the country's institutions to confront this challenge, the modern conception of risk management, the public's perceptions, and the intervention processes and strategies of the relevant institutions.



In terms of the country's institutions, Bolivia has over the past 10 years engaged in a deep transformation. The administrative decentralization underway has transferred responsibilities and resources to the departmental and municipal governments. The concept of People's Participation has ensured that planning responds to the demands of the local population, as a tool for

empowering civil society in defining their own development priorities and the best use of available resources. Advances have already been made in fields such as the environment, biodiversity, and the management of forest resources, creating the right conditions for the Ministry of Planning to introduce risk management as a cross-cutting criterion when defining and implementing all policies.

Risk management is now seen as intimately linked with sustainable development, since vulnerability increases have been the result of social processes involving relations among the various social groups and between them and the environment. Levels of poverty, education, and access to opportunities all have a bearing on vulnerability. Hence, disaster prevention and mitigation is not a separate activity or a special approach, but part of the guidelines that must be taken into account by decision-makers at all levels.

The population's perception of disasters is closely linked to their culture, even their religious beliefs. This is not only true in the case of marginal groups, as can be seen in the case of new residential or commercial developments that fail to take into account unacceptable levels of risk.

The intervention process is taking place in the psychological aftermath of the recent disasters, which are becoming more frequent and devastating and affect the country's economic well-being as a whole.

The Plan's implementation seeks to consolidate the role of existing institutions by recognizing the legal attributes and strengths of each one, building their capacity, promoting research on the nature and extension of existing hazards, and increasing the awareness of the general population. Finally, it seeks to establish legal standards and mechanisms that incorporate prevention.

The passing of the Act has been a very important step. However, the most important steps lie ahead: employing the National Risk Prevention and Mitigation Plan to move from response alone to prevention. This will take several years, no doubt, but it must be done.

***For more information, please contact:***

***Marco Antonio Rodríguez***

***[marqor@yahoo.com](mailto:marqor@yahoo.com)***