



ProVention Consortium –World Bank meeting

Disaster prevention in Central America: the NGO perspective

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In an effort to learn from the Mitch crisis, VOICE has promoted a wide-ranging process of analysis, reflection and consultation between dozens of NGOs (from Europe, the US and Central America) and other players (international agencies, national governments, local authorities, networks, etc.). Such a process has produced a series of recommendations put forward in May last year at the Stockholm's Donors Summit for reconstruction and development in Central America.

The main stages of this process culminated in the Strategy Seminar entitled "Post-Mitch: from Emergency to Development", organised by VOICE in Brussels on 17 and 18 March 1999; and the work carried out in a working group formed by NGOs and various officials from the European Commission.

This presentation is widely based on the Brussels Paper, outcome of such process. It is important to point out that the contents of the Brussels Paper are completely in keeping with the Statement from National Coordinations and Regional Networks of civil society groups on the reconstruction and transformation of Central America (Tegucigalpa, Honduras, 22 April 1999).

The best diagnosis of the negative impact of Hurricane Mitch was made by a Nicaraguan farmer, who said: "I don't know whether Nicaragua has gone 20 years backwards - but I have!" This statement clearly illustrates how the human development that must be achieved in Central America must above all take people into consideration, and not just infrastructure. The countries affected by the hurricane were already extremely poor beforehand. The tragedy of Mitch can either provide an opportunity to avoid reverting to this situation, or it can sow the seeds for greater tragedies in the future.

Threats from nature are an integral part of daily life in this region, although only the most devastating extraordinary events deserve the attention of international media. Floods, drought, landslides and other minor disasters cause a continuous leaking of human and material resources. The transition to sustainable development necessarily has to take into account prevention and mitigation as key concepts for a permanent reduction of vulnerability. In this sense, there is a need to rethink those development policies and models, as well as operational methodologies and priorities, which have led to the accumulation of these weaknesses and vulnerabilities.

The lessons learnt from the emergency action in the region has important implications for the reconstruction strategy. Hurricane Mitch had the greatest impact on the most vulnerable population groups, who were living in high-risk areas, thereby highlighting the inadequate overall management of the region owing to the lack of a policy and appropriate regulation on land tenure. Reconstruction,

therefore, must include an analysis of the region and planning for it, with special emphasis on improving the management of water resources and the distribution of urban and rural settlements.

Our analysis has emphasised some of the key element for a reconstruction focussed on prevention and preparedness.

1. **Decentralisation.** A reduction of vulnerability is widely based on building capacities at local level and such process must rely on an extensive involvement of all the players affected by it. Here, we consider it vital to make the most of the opportunity to increase autonomy levels and strengthen decentralised administrations (especially town councils), and to provide them with the necessary instruments (technical, budgetary, etc.) for them to be the true protagonists of the reconstruction and development process. To this end, donors and NGOs need to draw up a common strategy in order to call on the States of Central America to extend the decentralisation process, giving a key role to town councils and citizens' organisations.
2. **Land tenure and management.** Hurricane Mitch mainly affected marginal land on hillsides and on slopes along riverbeds widely used for precarious settlements or small agricultural production. This only may be avoided if the reconstruction process is accompanied by an effective land tenure policy, based on an analysis of and planning for the use of the land. This must provide adequate space for addressing strategic issues such as, for example, the management of water resources (the lack of which has been a prime contributor in magnifying the effects of the hurricane) or the distribution of residential sites and services in urban and rural areas. This is a prerequisite for any reasonable project to resettle victims, and as such must be given priority on the agendas of the region's national governments and in relations between such governments and donors.
To make land projects more effective they have to be identified, planned, implemented, monitored and evaluated with direct participation by one or more local partners. Secondly, under no circumstances is it advisable for outside players to take on the purchase of the necessary land. On the contrary, this could entail a risk of encouraging speculation and, even more seriously, of relieving national governments of what are their responsibilities.
Nevertheless, donor states will certainly have to bring to the negotiating table the issue of identifying and preparing the sites necessary for housing. One interesting possibility could be to propose an "exchange" to recipient states, whereby they could write off part of their national debt in return for preparing these sites.
3. **Coordination and Complementarity.** With the same aim in mind, we see a need to promote the setting up of bodies to coordinate information and activities between all the players (both national and international) operating in the same country and/or region and between different countries in the same region. Complementarity between the sectoral approach (housing, production, health, education, etc.) and the regional approach (integrated policy and planning for each administrative unit) constitutes a fundamental methodological tool for ensuring the success of the activities undertaken.
4. **Prioritisation.** Rural areas, the poorest sectors of the population and the most vulnerable groups (peasants, marginalized urban groups, women, children, old people, the sick, ethnic minorities, disables, etc.) are normally hit the hardest by the effects of such occurrences. Consequently, we consider it advisable to prioritise activities for the benefit of these areas and target groups, especially the groups and individuals to be included in housing reconstruction programmes.

Here, it is important to rely on full, genuine cooperation from the local authorities and grass-root organisations.

5. There is a need to ensure a **continuum** between emergency relief, rehabilitation and development cooperation, taking into consideration the previous work done and making the best possible use of available resources. In this regard, overall plans should be drawn up for sectors and geographical areas, based on a diagnosis of their needs, with the participation of the different civil society groups and with respect for local mechanisms.
6. **Consistency in funding.** It is necessary to increase the resources aimed at preventing disasters and organising an efficient civil defence system involving communities in a rapid alert system. In this respect, the processes of community organisation and capacity-building should be an integral part of the activities to prepare for and prevent disasters.

Some recommendations refer to specific sectors:

7. **Basic health.** At the operational level, this implies a need to continue focusing on the prevention and control of epidemics, ensuring the rational use of essential medicines (using the WHO's "essential drug list", for example), taking into account needs for additional food (mother-child relationship, elderly people, etc.), building the capacity of paramedical personnel and staff involved in managing programmes and projects at municipal/local level, caring for community mental health (building the capacity of local staff, self-help groups, etc.) and people with disabilities (rehabilitation). All this must be done in close coordination with specific institutions (such as the WHO).
8. **Food aid.** People have felt the provision of food to be one of the most crucial necessities. Although the arrival of food through the World Food Programme was timely, this food was sometimes badly distributed: access to some areas was difficult, because of either physical obstacles (i.e. damage to infrastructures), or political ones (the unwillingness of some governments to cooperate with local bodies controlled by opposition parties). This highlights the need to identify target zones more accurately, and to better coordinate food aid delivery. Even so, a certain amount of caution is advisable, as massive distributions during the sowing season could also act as a disincentive to farmers. In this regard, it would be worthwhile to study the possibility of supporting small-scale producers from areas that were not affected by the hurricane, and buying the food necessary for aid operations from them.
9. **Food security.** A sustainable, coherent food security policy can help the poorest communities to achieve a high degree of autonomous development and preparation for natural disasters. In this situation, it is not advisable to support massive imports of food products from elsewhere. Similarly, it is vital to include elements of agricultural rehabilitation and sustainable development in emergency operations right from the start. Intervention on food security must be wide-ranging and, in addition to providing seed, tools and other materials, should include the management of natural resources, in particular the rehabilitation of slopes near rivers, management of water resources in the hills, implementation of afforestation and reforestation programmes. This must be linked to the social and organisational empowerment of local communities, taking into

account traditional techniques for increasing the communities' resilience and preparedness for disasters.

10. **Housing.** Where it is not possible to guarantee the resources necessary for building reasonably spacious and well-equipped housing units from the start, it may be a good idea to promote a “gradual reconstruction” approach. This could start off with the building of housing that respects an acceptable minimum standard and could be supplemented by the setting up of a pool of materials, the provision of technical and training assistance, self-construction (the building of homes by their future occupants), etc., thereby paving the way for the beneficiaries to be able to improve and extend their homes in the medium and long term. Nevertheless, donor states will certainly have to bring to the negotiating table the issue of identifying and preparing the sites necessary for housing. One interesting possibility could be to propose an “exchange” to recipient states, whereby they could write off part of their national debt in return for their preparing these sites.
11. **Infrastructures.** It is important to support the restoration of basic services, such as the infrastructure related to the supply of electricity, communications, schools, health centres and community centres. And, although they are less visible, the rehabilitation and/or reconstruction of the following should not be forgotten: a) the rural roads that play a key role in reactivating agricultural production and ensure an easy displacement of population during emergencies; b) hydrographical and meteorological stations located in rural areas, which are a vitally important tool in meteorological observation and forecasting.

In short, for cooperation to be effective, it is important to work within a strategic framework in which the various players carry out their activities on the basis of a previously drafted and agreed “country-plan”. Within this framework, all **donors** should:

- Make available consistent resources earmarked for disaster prevention and preparedness. Despite the good results achieved, the programme DIPECHO of the European Commission receives only 8 million Euros, 1% of the overall humanitarian budget.
- Put pressure for a reform of the systems of land ownership and tenure (town and country planning), as the need for this has become even more acute since Mitch. In this regard, account must be taken of the fact that the projects and programmes carried out to date have not been very effective.
- Facilitate the administrative processes for making decisions and disbursing funds. Making DP a priority.

NGOs. For a long time NGOs have played a special role in the region. With a continuous presence in the last 30 years, they have become major actors in the social and economic life: they have established strong links with the local civil society advocating for its rights, contributed to strengthen local autonomies, kept the attention alive in the international community, ensured continuity in international aid influencing the political agenda of donors. All this has represented an important asset during and after the crisis. But their performance has been far from satisfactory.

- NGOs must take into account the existing local situation and structures. In countries like the Central American ones, the traditional style of emergency operations must cope with a high level

of awareness and participation of target communities who are willing and capable to play an active role at all stages of intervention;

- They must coordinate with one another by promoting the creation and/or consolidation of bodies aimed at coordinating information and activities between the NGOs working in the same country and/or area.
- To facilitate this cooperation further, however, and on the basis of existing experience, it might be worthwhile to promote joint action in designing and implementing programmes with an integrated approach, linking various operational projects.
- In general, NGOs have to focus on prevention as a structural element of their projects.

Finally, prevention and preparedness are not solely a matter of infrastructure or relief organisations. They involve society at all levels: citizens, administrations, schools and universities, armed forces, health system, private sector and media. Only a widespread and comprehensive participation may produce a true and effective reduction of vulnerability. In this sense there is need for a common and coordinated approach from the international community and local governments, involving governmental and non-governmental sectors as well as private and public players.

It would also be important to raise the awareness of northern citizens on this issue. As long as emergencies monopolise media attention and the citizens' generosity, relief operations will be by far more politically rewarding than the long term prevention and preparedness policies, for our decision makers.

Too many times we all have seen the outcome of our developmental efforts being destroyed and the communities we assisted in our previous actions being hit again and again. It is time to stop all this and we hope ProVention to be the tool for a real change.