

# El Salvador: A case study in the role of the affected state in humanitarian action

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Patricia Weiss Fagen, Georgetown University

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## **About the authors:**

Patricia Weiss Fagen is a Senior Associate at Georgetown University.

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Humanitarian Policy Group  
Overseas Development Institute  
111 Westminster Bridge Road  
London  
SE1 7JD  
United Kingdom  
Tel: +44(0) 20 7922 0300  
Fax: +44(0) 20 7922 0399  
Website: [www.odi.org.uk/hpg](http://www.odi.org.uk/hpg)  
Email: [hpgadmin@odi.org.uk](mailto:hpgadmin@odi.org.uk)  
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# 1. Background

The following case study of state responses to disasters in El Salvador was undertaken in the context of a broader project on 'The Role of Affected States in Humanitarian Action', overseen by the Overseas Development Institute. It sets out to examine the degree to which the Salvadoran state, in the aftermath of decades of conflict, assumed responsibilities for meeting humanitarian needs during three natural disasters that affected the country between 2001 and 2005, and how the state's response has evolved since 2005. The analysis encompasses the actions of international aid actors and donors during these disasters, and their past and current support for state mechanisms for prevention and preparedness. Research was carried out during a ten-day mission to El Salvador in November 2007. The researcher interviewed key actors in government, NGOs and international agencies. In addition, the researcher assembled extensive materials relating to the events and analysing the consequences of national and international interventions.

El Salvador is a small, densely populated country bordering Honduras and Guatemala, with a population of about 7 million. For 12 years, from 1980 to 1992, the country was engaged in civil conflict. Some 75,000 people died, approximately a million were displaced and another million left the country. The war was primarily brought about by social inequalities, repression and closed avenues for political participation. Similar wars were taking place at the same time in Nicaragua and Guatemala. The Central American civil strife, and the conflict in El Salvador in particular, attracted international attention in the context of the Cold War. The fighting was prolonged by continuing support from Cold War rivals for the government or the insurgents. El Salvador, as well as Nicaragua and Guatemala, also attracted the attention of dozens of international NGOs from North America and Europe. They came to administer humanitarian assistance and, whether they were, in fact, ideologically committed, they were identified by the government or the insurgents as sympathetic to one side or the other. Most worked in regions controlled by the insurgents. The war ended in a negotiated peace rather than a victory for one or the other side. The peace has held, but the country's extreme poverty has persisted and inequalities have become more pronounced.

In the midst of the conflict, in October 1986, El Salvador experienced a major earthquake which caused serious damage in the capital San Salvador and surrounding areas. The government reported between 1,000 and 1,500 deaths and 200,000 left homeless. However, state preparedness for disasters began seriously with the devastating impact of Hurricane Mitch in October 1998. Thereafter, issues related to disaster response and preparation moved rapidly up the policy agendas of governments and international actors in Central America. Hurricane Mitch is considered the deadliest storm to have struck the Western Hemisphere in two centuries, with a death-toll of over 11,000 and damage affecting some three million people throughout the Central American region.<sup>1</sup> El Salvador escaped the worst of the storm, and its losses were minor compared to those of Honduras and Nicaragua. Nevertheless, Mitch left 230 dead in the western part of the country, forced 500,000 to flee from flooding and destroyed some 80% of the corn crop. Coffee plantations and sugar cane crops were also destroyed.<sup>2</sup> Mitch clearly demonstrated the need for region-wide, systematic mechanisms of risk management and disaster response.

The present report is primarily concerned with the post-Mitch period, beginning in 2001. On 13 January and 13 February 2001, two major earthquakes struck, causing extensive damage throughout the central part of the country, including in the capital, San Salvador, and affecting about a quarter of the population. A second double disaster struck in the first week of October 2005, with the almost simultaneous eruption of the Ilimatepec volcano in the populous and relatively prosperous coffee growing department of Santa Ana, and Tropical Storm Stan, which produced flooding throughout the country's coastal areas.

Three factors are key to understanding El Salvador's approaches and responses to disasters. First, the country is part of a region highly vulnerable to disasters which do not respect borders. The Central American governments and donors alike have

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<sup>1</sup><http://wlf.ncdc.noaa.gov/oa/reports/mitch/mitch.html#INTRO>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

developed region-wide programmes of early warning, training and disaster mitigation measures. However, these mechanisms remain weak. Although El Salvador was largely spared the destruction caused by the major storms that affected other parts of Central America, Mexico and the Caribbean in 2007, such luck cannot hold. The only question is whether the next emergency will take the form of another earthquake, flood or volcanic eruption.

Second, partly as a legacy of the civil conflict of the 1980s, El Salvador has politically active municipal and local governments which, although presently apparently in decline, are capable of defining risks and implementing disaster responses. This report

will describe the advantages of and obstacles to local response initiatives, and the tensions between centralised and decentralised mechanisms for meeting disasters.

Third, again partly as a legacy of the civil conflict, international entities, including NGOs, donors and United Nations agencies, have developed and maintained relationships with Salvadoran civil society. These relations, though at times highly politicised or politically manipulated, have reinforced municipal and local abilities to act in the face of disasters. International NGOs have longstanding ties to Salvadoran counterparts, and support them in disaster prevention actions.

## 2. The disasters of 2001 and 2005

### 2.1. The earthquakes of January and February 2001

On 13 January an earthquake measuring 7.6 on the Richter scale struck just off the coast of El Salvador, producing widespread damage through the middle of the country. One month later, on 13 February, the middle of the country was hit by another earthquake measuring 6.6, with an epicenter close to the national capital. It was followed by 3,000 aftershocks and subsequent quakes almost as strong as the first. The Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLAC) at the request of the Salvadoran government, analysed the damage and responses in both instances, and their estimates are used by most sources.<sup>3</sup> The two earthquakes affected a swathe of the country in which a quarter of the Salvadoran population lived, and its victims were among the poorest. A large portion of rural inhabitants lived in difficult to access areas in flimsy dwellings, and their survival depended on subsistence agriculture. The working class and lower middle class neighbourhoods of Santa Tecla and the urban poor living in the periphery of the capital suffered disproportionately from the quake, compared to more affluent areas of San Salvador.

In monetary terms, the two earthquakes are thought to have cost \$1,604 million, or 12% of the country's

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<sup>3</sup> ECLAC is one of the five regional commissions of the United Nations. The headquarters is in Santiago Chile, but there is an important office, as well, in Mexico. ECLAC engages extensively in research and análisis of theses related to economics, social development and the environment. ECLAC/CEPAL <http://www.eclac.org/cgi-bin/getProd.asp?xml=/publicaciones/xml/0/10130/P10130.xml&xsl=/mexico/tpl/p9f.xsl&base=/tpl/imprimir.xsl> | El Terremoto de 13 de enero de 2001 en El Salvador, El terremoto del 13 de Enero de 2001: Impacto socioeconómico y ambiental

Impacto socioeconómico y ambiental. Perfiles de proyectos. ECLAC/CEPAL <http://www.eclac.cl/cgi-bin/getProd.asp?xml=/publicaciones/xml/5/23025/P23025.xml&xsl=/mexico/tpl/p9f.xsl&base=/tpl/imprimir.xsl> | Efectos en El Salvador de las lluvias torrenciales tormenta tropical Stan y erupción del volcán Ilimatepec, Santa Ana, octubre del 2005, perfiles de Proyecto. ECLAC was funded by the government and supported by the UNDP, IDB and other UN agencies and government ministries.

gross national product (GNP). The worst-affected sectors were health, education and housing, infrastructure, including transport, communication, electricity, energy, water and sanitation, and the productive sector.<sup>4</sup> In all, 1,159 people were killed and 8,122 injured. Just under 150,000 houses were destroyed and 185,000 damaged. A million and a half people were displaced.<sup>5</sup>

Although there was a national structure in place for disasters, thanks in large part to measures taken in the wake of Hurricane Mitch (described below), there were no contingency plans for a seismic disaster, notwithstanding the fact that the country had recently experienced a major earthquake and its vulnerabilities were well understood. In any event, the damage far exceeded what the government could manage. The civilian institutional structure was overwhelmed. The government quickly declared a state of emergency and called upon its National Emergency Committee (COEN) to assess the damage and needs. The COEN efforts collapsed within a few days, and the government asked the military to take charge, marginalizing the COEN structure. The government sought international assistance and devolved responsibility for managing international funds onto the National Association of Private Entrepreneurs (ANEP), which, in collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Relations, established bank accounts to track donations in money and kind. ANEP's management capacities were generally respected.

The armed forces were deployed to manage logistics, communications infrastructure and, along with the Salvadoran Red Cross, to undertake rescue operations. The military had been receiving training for disaster response since Mitch, and within a short time had specialised equipment supplied by foreign

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<sup>4</sup> The figures are summarized from the extensive studies by ECLAC, and are cited from Red Para el Desarrollo Local, *El Salvador. Desarrollo Local y Descentralización del Estado: Situación Actual y Desafíos*, San Salvador 2003. p.217.

<sup>5</sup> These figures, originally produced by ECLAC, were taken from the summary prepared by the Centro de Coordinación para la Prevención de los Desastres Naturales en América Central, 18 March 2001. <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWB.NSF/db900SID/OCHA-64DFJD?OpenDocument>

donors at its disposal. The first task was to reopen roads, or what passed for roads, since many of the communities most affected were remote and hard to reach, even in normal times. For those in the most isolated communities, months passed with no assistance.

International aid to El Salvador arrived rapidly. According to ECLAC, the country received an estimated \$17.8m from bilateral and multilateral sources for the January quake,<sup>6</sup> and another \$12m for relief following February's.<sup>7</sup> Over the years of conflict, and with the impact of Hurricane Mitch, donors, UN agencies and NGOs had become adept at channelling humanitarian assistance. Aid was delivered to and through the central government and, with government approval, directly to municipalities and to locally based NGOs with which the international community frequently had previously established ties. The responses were dynamic but, by all accounts, not well-coordinated. The support directly channelled to municipalities was effective in some areas, but NGOs in affected regions sometimes complained that municipal officials used political criteria to prioritise communities and programmes. Catholic and Evangelical churches were important in organising relief and recovery efforts, and they worked with both national and international actors.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and several national Red Cross groups, especially the US and Spanish offices, worked with the Salvadoran Red Cross, bringing in millions of dollars and donating vehicles and in-kind materials. Millions of dollars also entered the country for earthquake relief from major NGOs with histories of presence in El Salvador, including Oxfam UK, Catholic Relief Services, CARE, the American Friends Service Committee and World Vision. Several NGOs with projects in El Salvador at the time of the two earthquakes diverted all programmes to

earthquake relief, augmented staff, sent equipment and, after the relief phase, sent additional funds for reconstruction.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, Salvadoran migrants sent money and in-kind contributions to earthquake victims, totaling about \$500,000.<sup>9</sup> This contribution was over and above the remittances migrants continued to send to help families with recovery.

The World Food Programme (WFP) and the Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO) brought immediate aid, donating millions of dollars in food and health care to the earthquake effort. UNICEF brought water, household goods and medical equipment, UNDP sent funds and dispatched UN Volunteers and OCHA and the International Labour Organisation sent disaster management experts. UN officials from these agencies remained in El Salvador for months, directing operations and training Salvadorans. FAO and UNFPA contributed funds and initiated projects. After the January earthquake, the UN system put its expenses for the period between February and July at some \$35 million.<sup>10</sup> With the February earthquake, the sum was raised to \$40m. International agencies and NGOs conducted their operations with full authority to choose where to establish their programmes. Although the Salvadoran government recorded international contributions and did its best to keep track of what was coming into the country, the government did not monitor operations directly funded in specific areas or for non-government entities, nor did it attempt to channel funding to alternative recipients. Established UN agencies and NGOs reported having collaborated with relevant government agencies at national and local levels.

The major donors during the earthquake relief and reconstruction effort were Spain and the United States. The former mainly contributed funds, while the latter primarily supported the work of CARE, CHF and Samaritan's Purse for the January earthquake,

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<sup>6</sup> ECLAC, Evaluación del Terremoto...13 enero, p. 22.

<sup>7</sup> ECLAC Evaluación del Terremoto...13 febrero, p. 10 This ECLAC estimate appears low. USAID calculates the US contribution alone to the two earthquake efforts to total over US \$17million, US\$14 million from USAID/OFDA and the rest from military and other donations. "El Salvador Earthquakes, Final Fact Sheet. [www.releifweb.int./rw/rwb.nsf/db900sod//ACOS-64BHJ4?](http://www.releifweb.int./rw/rwb.nsf/db900sod//ACOS-64BHJ4?) The US and other major donors may be counting broader categories of assistance.

<sup>8</sup> Based on reports from CARE, World Vision, AFSC, and ECLAC

<sup>9</sup> ECLAC, February. In addition, a Salvadoran community leader in the US told the author that Hurricane Mitch and especially the 2001 earthquake had catalyzed Salvadorans in the diaspora first to raise and send relief funds, and to move from this action to undertake long term poverty alleviation, education and health related activities. Salvadoran HTAs today are among the most active in these respects.

<sup>10</sup> ECLAC, enero

to which Lutheran World Relief and Save the Children were added in February. Germany, Italy, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Canada, Denmark, Japan, Norway, France, Mexico, Taiwan, the Dominican Republic and Venezuela all sent funds for relief after one or both earthquakes, and even Guatemala, Nicaragua and Honduras, disaster victims themselves, sent equipment and in-kind donations.<sup>11</sup>

The Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), which had been a major actor in coordinating relief during Mitch, postponed its previously scheduled January regional Consultative Group meeting and held it in March instead. The meeting, held in Madrid, became a fund-raising effort to support reconstruction in El Salvador, as well as for the countries still emerging from the effects of Mitch. Donors pledged \$1.3 billion.<sup>12</sup> The IADB approved a \$105m loan for road rebuilding. Another IADB programme is described below.

## 2.2. Social Investment Funds for Local Development

During 1991, the IADB made low-cost loans throughout the Central American region for what its proponents termed 'social investment funds' (FIS). In the wake of Mitch, the FIS funds were tapped heavily for reconstruction programmes, and a large number of donors added funding to the original IADB programme. Implementation of the FIS projects coincided with previous conflict and post-conflict government efforts to strengthen municipal government and promote local development (DL in the Spanish acronym, hence the merging of FIS/DL). During the conflict, municipal governments had been controlled by the political right and were seen as political tools against leftist influence. In subsequent years, municipal authorities became more heterogeneous through elections, and mayors became more representative of their populations. In 2001, several FIS/DL projects were in place in the former conflict zone, which coincided with the earthquake-affected areas. According to a high-ranking official in a large NGO, mayors with experience in political as well as armed mobilisation during the conflict were especially effective in mobilising efforts for recovery and reconstruction.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> USAID, El Salvador Earthquake. Fact Sheet.

Prior to the earthquake, FIS/DL was working in several municipalities. There was money for a wide range of locally selected projects, primarily in infrastructure, which the municipalities were supposed to submit for approval. An FIS/DL staff of under 200 were based in mayors' offices, and funding went directly to the municipalities for local services, mainly health, education and housing infrastructure. FIS/DL had no discretionary funds, and communities were required to raise matching FIS/DL funds themselves. Donors were apparently willing to participate by helping poorer communities to match the FIS money.<sup>13</sup>

Following the emergency earthquake response, the FIS/DL directors told mayors in affected zones where they were present (mainly in Usulután, San Vicente, Cuscutlán and La Paz) to make their own assessments of damage and family needs and to put together concrete proposals for assistance. These estimates were taken at face value and assistance was quickly forthcoming. FIS brought in the tools and materials for rebuilding homes and replacing furnishings, and gave funds to affected families. To the surprise of some, a subsequent audit by Price Waterhouse showed the municipal assessments to have been largely accurate. Families were given the task of cleaning the debris from their own homes, and the municipality used donated trucks to take it away. The work undoubtedly was more quickly accomplished in this way than it would have been had the communities waited for the state to act. The cleanup took about five months, according to the former FIS/DL co-Director; everyone was put to work and the cleanup money was paid to the local people who needed it. When most of the debris had been cleared, the FIS paid local people to build temporary housing, which was later replaced with more permanent homes, for which the IADB

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<sup>13</sup> The account comes largely from an interview with Tom Hawk, formerly an American government employee and subsequently employed in the Salvadoran government. He was the co-Director of FIS/DL. Hernan Romero, formerly IDB focal point for FIS/DL and Peter Sollis, a Washington based member of the IDB staff who helped plan the FIS approach, also contributed to the account. The initial local development program approved by IDB in 1997 was for US\$37.8 million. In a second phase in September 2001 the Bank approved US\$70million to respond to the earthquake demands. The FISDL also executed two emergency projects financed by the IDB for US\$20 million each.



gave a low-cost loan to the Housing Ministry. The Health, Education, Environment and Public Works ministries used donor funds to funds for longer-term reconstruction needs.

The process allowed quick local recovery, at least in the realm of physical rebuilding. Perhaps more important, according to its champions, it made use of El Salvador's still vibrant organisational capacities at the municipal level, capacities largely established during the war and honed in the response to Mitch. The lesson for donors, according to FIS/DL promoters, is that if an international entity knows, at the time of a disaster, what national institutions and programmes are viable and trusted, these can and should be given priority as recipients of donor funds. FIS/DL, they maintain, was such an entity. In the 2001 earthquake recovery process, donors were able to give substantial control to local institutions. And, they further contend, the government also benefited. Although it has been argued that the locally managed targeted disaster recovery removed control from the government and could be seen as impeding efforts to implement and coordinate national disaster-related efforts, the positive result was that citizens were the major actors and did not blame the government for what was done or not done. Although relatively efficient, this kind of decentralised approach was controversial, and in subsequent disasters the government opted for more centralisation and control.

Subsequent governments in El Salvador revised the model. While state and non-state actions maintained some participatory mechanisms in response to the 2005 disasters, these were managed with more central oversight. Since then, for better and worse, local capacities for mobilisation have seriously deteriorated. Indeed, more than one international actor recently arrived in El Salvador, including a young Salvadoran disaster specialist, described the present system as top down, and informed this writer that they believed there was 'no tradition' in El Salvador of local empowerment or decision-making.

### **2.3. The October 2005 disasters: Tropical Storm Stan and the eruption of the Ilamatepec Volcano**

Lessons learned from 2001 notwithstanding, the Law of Civil Defense was not changed to strengthen

the national emergency system; thus, neither disaster management tools nor preparations at the local level were sufficiently strong in 2005 to allow a strong nationally coordinated response to a serious disaster, much less two. Four years later in 2005, the Salvadoran government's Emergency Coordinating Committee still lacked adequate policies and tools to permit financial and operational management of major crises. A new law meant to establish orderly procedures and to define institutional roles was passed in 2005 but not implemented until the following year, and so was not put to the test by Stan and the Ilamatepec disasters. However, by most accounts the government was considerably better prepared in 2005 than it had been in 2001.

The Ilamatepec Volcano in western El Salvador erupted on 1 October. The 2,000 people evacuated due to the volcano had to remain in poorly prepared shelters for over two months due to persistent volcanic activity.<sup>14</sup> On 3 October Tropical Storm Stan's floods, accompanied by landslides and communication outages, spread through half the country, killing 69 people and forcing 70,000 into evacuation.<sup>15</sup> ECLAC estimated damage at \$355.6m, or 2.2% of GNP.<sup>16</sup> The coffee-producing area of Santa Ana, where the volcano erupted, is at the heart of the Salvadoran economy. The major physical losses from the combined disasters were the same as for the earthquake, in the social sector and infrastructure, followed by environmental degradation.<sup>17</sup>

The government, as before, called on the private sector organisation ANEP to manage financial transactions, and called out the armed forces for the tasks of rescue, evacuation and logistics. The

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<sup>14</sup> ECLAC, 2006, p. 12, see also, UN General Assembly, ECOSOC, A/61/78-E/2006/61 *Humanitarian Assistance and Rehabilitation for El Salvador and Guatemala*, Report of the Secretary-General, May 3, 2006, parags 12-14.

<sup>15</sup> Again, as in the previous disaster, the government asked ECLAC to do an assessment of damages and needs, and ECLAC figures are used by most of the other sources. ECLAC, *Efectos en El Salvador de las lluvias torrenciales, tormenta tropical Stan y erupción del volcán Ilamatepec (Santa Ana)*, October, 2006. LC/MEX'R.892. <http://www.eclac.cl/cgi-bin/getProd.asp?xml=/publicaciones/xml/5/23025/P23025.xml&xsl=/mexico/tpl/p9f.xsl&base=/tpl/imprimir.xs>,

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 15

Emergency Coordinating Committee sent appeals to all humanitarian agencies in the country to attend to disaster victims. The disaster coordinator of CARE recalled that the government had sent its relief teams to Santa Ana first, and was not present when Stan struck the area where CARE was then working, coincidentally on disaster training.<sup>18</sup> As CARE and other NGOs attest, locally organised action facilitated rescue work and victim assistance.

Both ECLAC and a report from the UN Secretary-General on responses in El Salvador and Guatemala to Stan and Ilamatepec praise the Salvadoran government for responding immediately and taking measures to meet the crisis. The report cites rescue operations and actions to restore road infrastructure, social services and communications. To do so, it is important to note, the government

was different purposes and channel them to disaster relief. There were no contingency resources for these purposes, and virtually none are present today. The UN report affirmed that El Salvador's community-based early-warning mechanisms had stood the country in good stead, but recommended a stepped up effort.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, the UN report also noted the absence of pre-positioned contingency stocks in disaster-prone areas and the need for better planning for alternative access routes to disaster areas. The report urged updated protocols and agreements to facilitate the use of stocks for future emergencies and continuing updating of logistical and procurement information.<sup>20</sup>

International donors sent an estimated \$10m for disaster relief.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Interview with Roberto Alvarado, Disaster Coordinator for CARE.

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<sup>19</sup> ECLAC, ...2006, p.14, UN parag. 18.

<sup>20</sup> UN, parag. 19

<sup>21</sup> ECLAC, pl 14.



## 3. Evolution of a national system

### 3.1 The national structure 2001–2005

Until 2006, disaster management was located in a specially created government emergency committee, the Comité de Emergencia Nacional (COEN). An Emergency Operation Centre was charged within coordinating the government's overall response in case of disaster. Disasters were tracked by a well articulated early warning system: green, yellow, orange and red successively, as the disaster approached and then struck. Ministries, the police, the armed forces and local officials were mobilised in an emergency to conduct damage assessments and to set relief priorities. The government-orchestrated damage assessments have been the basis for international disaster relief appeals in the two disasters described in this report, as well as in other emergencies. Donor governments and UN agencies also have conducted their own rapid assessments, with added information from non-government sources. The appeals that have gone to the international community have represented consensus estimates from national and international sources of immediate needs. Past disasters have shown the government less prepared to take a leading role in planning early recovery or reconstruction. Although assessments of early recovery and reconstruction needs involve most of the same parties as for response actions, international donors and organisations, rather than the government, have taken the leading role in determining what is to be done. Throughout the process, funding overwhelmingly comes from international sources.

In August 2005, the Salvadoran Legislative Assembly approved new legislation for disaster management. The Law and Regulations for the Civil Protection, Prevention and Mitigation of Disasters gave stronger institutional backing to measures already in place, and included a government commitment both to disaster relief and to preparedness. The volcanic eruption and floods of October 2005, as noted, came just before this law could be implemented.

### 3.2 Creation of the System for Civil Protection, Prevention and Mitigation of Disasters<sup>22</sup>

In 2006, in accordance with the new law, the national system was revised and upgraded. Its operations followed more vertical lines of decision-making than those in existence, with better-defined lines of responsibility from top to bottom. The changes reflect lessons learned in the course of past disasters, where *ad hoc* responses resulted in uneven attention and uncoordinated procedures, which all but marginalised the national COEN in some of the hardest-hit sites. In the place of the more decentralised COEN structures, there is now a Civil Protection Directorate, directly under the Minister of Interior, which is meant to oversee and systematise the activities of all actors, public and private. The new structure has Commissions at the national, departmental and municipal levels, with largely parallel responsibilities. Community representation is brought into municipal-level operations.

At the top level is the National Commission of Civil Protection in the Interior Ministry, directly responsible to the Interior Minister. The Director of Civil Protection develops a national plan for emergency response which, when approved, is sent to the departmental and municipal authorities. The Civil Protection office coordinates the disaster-related work of ten ministries and government agencies (ministries: Foreign Relations, Health and Social Assistance, Agriculture and Livestock, Environment and Natural Resources, Public Works (transport, housing, urban development), National Defence and Education; agencies: the National Civil Police; two Representatives of the National Association of Private Enterprise; and three elected representatives of civil society associations from different parts of the country devoted to disaster prevention and mitigation). Whereas under the previous system, the main thrust of government action was in mobilising immediate relief, now, on

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<sup>22</sup> Information in this section has been drawn primarily from the Ley y Reglamentos de Protección Civil, Prevención y Mitigación de Desastres, of August 2005, an interview with Raúl Murillo, Deputy Director of the National Civil Protection Directorate, and materials made available from that office.

paper at least, emphasis is placed on longer-term outcomes beyond immediate response, i.e. risk management, prevention and mitigation/reconstruction. To strengthen national capacity for risk identification and management, the government relies on the National Service for Territorial Studies (SNET) – described below). The change of focus represents an answer to longstanding criticism of COEN operations, which in the previous disasters had begun phasing out as soon as early recovery operations had begun.

Among the tasks of the National Commission are to send out early warnings and determine appropriate action at each stage. Depending on the early warning information, the Commission recommends whether and when the President of the Legislative Assembly should declare a state of emergency. Upon an orange alert (when a disaster is imminent), it mobilises civil authorities, the armed forces and police and fire departments and all humanitarian agencies working in the affected regions to prepare for evacuations, equip places of refuge and maintain public order. As Hurricane Felix approached El Salvador in 2007, the authorities undertook preparations for coastal evacuations upon declaration of a yellow alert. In the event, Felix largely missed the country, there was no orange alert and the evacuation was called off. An earthquake in the Santa Ana region in December 2006 produced a yellow alert that did not go further. The government did evacuate people briefly during Hurricane Dean the same year. The red alert, in principle, should find residents of the affected localities already in shelters, and the shelters equipped with basic supplies.

At the second level, the Departmental Commissions for Civil Protections have been placed under the authority of the departmental governors, who receive funds channelled through the national government in emergency situations. They are charged with making needs assessments which determine funding priorities. The third level, the Municipal Commissions under the authority of the elected mayor, are more operational. Working with the relevant national and international parties in their jurisdiction, including representatives of the police, fire brigades, officials of agriculture, health and education ministries, the Salvadoran Red Cross and NGOs, and an elected community leader representing the villages in the municipality, they

develop plans of action for disaster prevention and mitigation. In a declared emergency, they coordinate with, and defer to, the Departmental Commission, which channels government funding.

The specific roles the Ministries of Health, Education, Agriculture/Livestock, Environment and Natural Resources and Public Works are to play in case of disaster are outlined in detail in the guidelines elaborated by the National Plan for Civil Protection, Prevention and Mitigation of Disasters. There is disaster expertise in all these entities. They conduct training of Ministry personnel and citizens throughout the country, and receive direct assistance from donors for their programmes. These programmes, which long predate the new legislation and system, are focused primarily on aspects of prevention, risk management, recovery and reconstruction as these affect their respective domains. University curricula, especially in the field of engineering and health, encompass disaster training, and university personnel have been brought into the process of disaster response and reconstruction.

The Health Ministry is relatively well prepared, with programmes dating back to the mid-1980s covering all aspects of disaster management, long and short term:<sup>23</sup> emergency response, the health infrastructure, health personnel, medical supplies, sanitation, nutrition and local preparedness. The ministry has published detailed accounts of the January/February earthquakes of 2001 and the hurricane/volcanic eruption of 2005, covering general impact and actions and the specific health-related activities completed. These publications have been of assistance in preparing this document. Public health and disaster-related material produced in El Salvador is being sent to Guatemala, Costa Rica and Nicaragua. The ministry works closely with PAHO, which in turn works with health ministries throughout the region. This being the case, both national and regional systems are in place. PAHO has funded extensive local training in El

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<sup>23</sup> Information based on Health Ministry materials and interviews with Gloria de Calles the Ministry focal point for Disasters, and DR. Mirna Pérez, Focal Point for Emergencies and Disasters, of the PAHO El Salvador office.

Salvador and throughout the region,<sup>24</sup> and provides the Health Ministry with vehicles and communication equipment. It brings Health Ministry officials together annually for discussions which always include disaster preparedness. Other donors to disaster-related work in the Health Ministry (building and equipping hospitals, preparing maps, equipping evacuation shelters, etc.) have been the US Army Southern Command, the government of Israel, UNICEF and World Vision. Outside of regular staff salaries, disaster preparedness, risk management and training depend on outside funding, primarily from PAHO.

One of the most important contributions to disaster management is a region-wide PAHO-initiated mechanism for tracking international disaster assistance coming into the country, *Suministro de Materiales en Desastres (SUMA)*. When the government declares a state of emergency, the Ministry of Foreign Relations asks for foreign assistance from all agencies based in the country. With special software created for SUMA, it is possible to monitor what is coming into the country and where it is being sent. The Salvadoran management of SUMA is especially well developed, and Salvadoran health personnel, trained by PAHO, were sent to Mexico in the wake of the floods in Tabasco to train personnel there. Although SUMA was created by PAHO for health-related uses, it now monitors all humanitarian assistance. SUMA receives funding from international donors. Why UN agencies outside of PAHO and NGOs do not (apparently) make greater use of this system is not clear. According to PAHO officials, the government relies on SUMA for the comprehensive information it provides. When the government gave financial responsibility for financial management to ANEP, the latter, in turn, made use of the SUMA system.

The ministry maintains five regionally based offices in the country charged with overseeing training, distributing material, evaluating hospitals and clinics and coordinating health care generally. One of the major ongoing tasks (undertaken with funding from PAHO and the World Bank) is to build and equip disaster-resistant hospitals and clinics.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> PAHO publishes a newsletter, *Disasters* with information on regional and national activities related to health care and disaster responses.

<sup>25</sup> A World Bank loan of 2003 was targeted to rebuild hospitals damaged in the earthquake.

Since 2001, seven hospitals have been wholly or partially reconstructed, but only one – in the earthquake- and flood-prone department of Usulután – is complete.

The Ministry of Education<sup>26</sup> oversees disaster education and training for schools throughout the country, at all levels. The training is based on the School Safety course which is part of an Education Strategy for Risk and Disaster Management, implemented by USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA) in the Latin America region. The assumption is that, in a country as vulnerable as El Salvador, students must know what to do in case of disasters, and must be trained in prevention. Disaster training figures prominently in university engineering and architecture faculties. In theory, all educational institutions are supposed to establish plans that correspond to their particular situations, i.e. rural, urban, near fault lines, near the coast, etc. On the response side, the plan should include provisions for evacuation drills, and on the prevention side, sensitisation with regard to environmental, water and sanitation issues. The ministry has distributed a Scholarly Protection Plan throughout the country. In reality, it is highly unlikely that more than a small portion of the nation's school attendees are well versed in this material or have a plan in place to follow. Where disasters occur regularly, interest may be relatively high, otherwise it is low. However, thanks to increased interest in climate change and the effects of global warming, Salvadorans and donors alike are giving more consideration to a disaster-relevant curriculum for schools.

All these activities are externally funded (indeed, the country's general educational budget depends largely on outside support). There are two channels for disaster-related funding in education. One is funding provided by donors – UNICEF and the IADB are important sources – which goes directly to the Education Ministry. The other comes through the regional entity that coordinates disaster prevention, the Coordination Center for the Prevention of Natural Disasters in Central America (CEPREDENAC), which directly funds disaster training. CEPREDENAC is a weak entity, with a small staff, but it has received

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<sup>26</sup> Information from interview with and materials provided by Lic. Maria Luisa Benitez, focal point for disasters in the Ministry.

more funding recently and has been able to fund some regional projects and training courses. The European Union's disaster programme DISPECHO, CARE and several other NGOs also contribute some funding. However, no international agency supports the Ministry of Education to the extent that PAHO backs the Ministry of Health.

### **3.4 The National Service for Territorial Studies (SNET)<sup>27</sup>**

Following Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and the massive earthquakes of early 2001, national awareness grew concerning the country's inadequate understanding of its areas of vulnerability and inadequate means to identify and monitor risk factors. In 2001 the government created the National Service for Territorial Studies (Servicio Nacional de Estudios Territoriales (SNET), a technical entity to monitor hazards and risk in a systematic manner. Existing monitoring systems were spread between different entities that did not share information, e.g. flood monitoring was the responsibility of Meteorology in the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock, and geological monitoring was the responsibility of the Ministry of Public Works. At the time of the 2001 earthquake no monitoring of seismic movements was being done. SNET was placed in the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources, and has four areas of responsibility: 1) Monitoring rivers and water quality for early warning signs of flooding; 2) tracking weather patterns, on an hourly basis in threatening situations, and tracking the effects of El Nino; 3) conducting geological monitoring; 4) developing disaster scenarios and inter-agency responses. Among SNET's most important contributions has been its mapping of risk areas. Maps are made available for government and public use and are used by international agencies involved in disaster response. The colour-coded early warnings noted above (green, yellow, orange and red) are based on data provided by SNET. When SNET staff detect an approaching threat, they bring it to public notice through the media and other communication channels.

SNET's operations are focused on prevention. Its priorities are maps of risk and information

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<sup>27</sup> Information primarily from an interview with Elda Vasquez de Godoy, General Director of SNET, and Oscar Hernández.

pertaining to possible danger. The technical capacity of its staff is highly regarded internationally as well as nationally. Although its work is appreciated, support does not meet needs. Much of the equipment it is using is out of date and difficult to replace when broken or worn out; there is no budget for maintenance; the water analysis laboratory is good but very limited. WFP is supporting SNET with its early warning technology, and SNET is working with UNDP to rectify some of the weaknesses and to establish a fund for emergencies. A small fund available in the Treasury Department can currently be tapped for immediate disaster response.

### **3.5 Training**

With each political change there is new leadership at national, departmental and municipal levels, and these leaders need to be trained. National-level technical staff have largely remained in place and their training is regularly updated. As noted, committees at all levels include representatives of the police, the fire brigade, the Health Ministry, the agriculture sector, NGOs and, at the local level, community leaders. All of these sectors receive training from the government, regional entities and donor governments. The Salvadoran armed forces, since Mitch, have been trained in disaster response, and have been aided and equipped by the US Army Southern Command. USAID/OFDA conducts disaster and risk management training for government and non-government officials throughout Central America, including technical assistance, institutional strengthening and long-term preparedness. Indeed, virtually every informant for this project reported having recently participated in a training session, or said that they were planning to do so (inside or outside of El Salvador). Some interviews had to be scheduled between sessions of a training workshop. All the relevant ministries make serious efforts to bring materials and expertise to disaster-affected parts of the country. The multiple training sessions and workshops, like virtually all programmes related to disasters, are primarily funded by donors.

### **3.6 Decentralisation**

Disaster responses are still decentralised. In past disasters large portions of private sector, NGO and donor funding has been channelled directly to the

area concerned rather than through the above-described mechanisms. The law states that it is the duty of all assistance and humanitarian groups working in the country to contribute directly to addressing the effects of disasters (Art. 32). The government formally acknowledges its dependence on foreign funding and permits donors, UN agencies and NGOs to use their funds as they see fit. There is no indication that this will change under the current system. The new law is designed to expand government management of disaster response and mitigation through more centralised bureaucratic mechanisms. National and international NGOs and other non-government entities retain control over their own funding. Therefore, they have been and will undoubtedly remain in the vanguard of disaster relief and, to the extent it takes place, in mitigation and risk management as well.

Municipal authorities in disaster-prone parts of the country – which is to say almost the entire land area of the country for one reason or another – consider disaster preparedness a major priority. The Corporation of Municipalities of the Republic of El Salvador (COMURES) is an association of

Mayors. It is a syndicate separate from the government, whose members represent different political groupings and whose positions, collectively and individually, may be in opposition to those of the government even when officials are in the same political party. Mayors, for obvious reasons, were in the forefront of urging stronger support for longer-range planning and attention to post-disaster reconstruction. The 23rd annual COMURES congress, held in November 2007, was devoted to the theme of the impact of climate change on the environment. Participants perceived that more frequent disasters was high among the impacts of climate change, and advocated strongly on behalf of support for risk management. The final declaration of the congress asked for stronger action by the ministries of Interior (Civil Protection) and the Environment and Natural Resources to determine the dimensions of El Salvador's vulnerabilities, and for developmental action to protect the population from risks. It urged the government to take measures that would allow more effective and rapid municipal-level rehabilitation and reconstruction after disasters.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> COMURES, “ XXIII Congreso Nacional de Municipalidades, San Salvador, November 5, 2007.





## 4. The UN and regional system and disaster preparedness

The guidelines for implementing the Law of Civil Protection call upon the Salvadoran government ‘upon the declaration of a national emergency, to manage and coordinate with the representatives of international organizations and foreign governments the facilitation of international cooperation needed to provide timely humanitarian assistance to disaster victims’.<sup>29</sup> The government pledges to inform diplomatic and consular officials of the unfolding events, to establish a management system for humanitarian assistance funds received, to guide the use of these contributions by means of needs assessments prepared by government agencies and ministries, and to prepare reports detailing how the funds received were used. As noted, international organisations and international NGOs have channelled funds and established relief and reconstruction projects directly in affected sites, without necessarily passing through government-established procedures. These efforts, however, are duly reported to the government which relies on SUMA and other mechanisms to keep track of them.

Informants from international agencies presented a mixed picture of disaster management thus far. They agreed across the board that El Salvador and the region as a whole had been giving disaster management a high profile in the decade since Hurricane Mitch. There was general satisfaction with the cooperation between the international community and state agencies, and praise for the capacities of the specialised ministries and SNET. There was also general approval of the new law, which was seen to have taken several necessary steps to define national responsibilities and coordinate activities within the government, and between the government and other entities. With a relatively modest investment, the head of the World Food Programme commented, emergency response capacities in Salvadoran state sectors could be considerably improved. The UNDP disaster focal point echoed these sentiments.<sup>30</sup>

Acknowledging the normal proclivity of international organisations to assume control of disaster situations, to implement their own plans of action

<sup>29</sup> Translated by the author from the Guidelines, p. 91.

<sup>30</sup> Interviews with Carlo Scaramella, of WFP and Ivan Morales of UNDP.

and to marginalise state plans and priorities, the agency directors interviewed recognised the relevance of El Salvador’s established structures and capacities. The nature of international–national collaboration varies from sector to sector and is especially strong in health and education. The new Directorate of Civil Protection is seen as well-intentioned and serious, but weak (the view of international as well as national informants) because of its thin staff, very limited funding and lack of experience. This allows donors, for better or worse, to continue to determine the priorities for assistance. So that the system will be coordinated in ways that are ‘better’ rather than ‘worse’, international agencies have brought their disaster operations together in a UN Disaster Management Team under the Resident Representative, tied to a Technical Team for Emergencies (UNETE), led by the World Food Programme. There are similar UNETE clusters throughout the region. UNETE includes UNDP, UNICEF, FAO, ILO, UNOPS, PAHO and UNFPA.

To indicate its commitment to close working relations within the system and with the Salvadoran state, UNETE has established four principles:<sup>31</sup>

1. To improve coherence and coordination of its work within the UN.
2. To improve the UN system in terms of consultation, assistance and aid vis-à-vis the government of El Salvador.
3. To create internal capacities and ensure common action in anticipation of disasters.
4. To improve horizontal coordination between the government, the UN, NGOs and donors.

Citing recent UN reforms and the cluster system, UNETE is making serious efforts to harmonise and coordinate UN capacities and resources. Member agencies, collectively and individually, support

<sup>31</sup> UNCT-UNETE, “Iniciativas de Naciones Unidas para fortalecer la preparación ante desastres en El Salvador, Estado de Avance,” El Salvador May 2007, a power point made available by WFP. The principles were translated by the author

relevant government ministries and, specifically, the Civil Protection Directorate in the Ministry of Interior.

UNETE is organised into four working groups that correspond roughly with the Salvadoran government system: logistics; health, water and sanitation; food security; shelter; and education. And, parallel with the government operational system, the UN has outlined roles and responsibilities for each agency in the advent of green, yellow, orange and red alerts. The UN maintains and regularly updates lists of vulnerable areas and specific vulnerabilities, maps of shelters, maps of where and in what sector NGOs have been working and other disaster-related information. The government's Center for Emergency Operations includes a seat for the United Nations, which is occupied by a disaster focal point in UNETE. The UN Disaster Management Team shares information with the Salvadoran government, as well as with mayors in disaster-affected areas, NGOs and donors. When there are disasters, major or minor, the UNETE team is supposed to evaluate needs within 48 hours, to communicate its findings and to establish what assistance will be needed for people who have been evacuated to shelters and those still in their communities.

A major preoccupation of UNETE has been the poor state of shelters that receive disaster victims. The spokesman for Civil Protection regards these shelters as adequate to their purpose,<sup>32</sup> but independent sources are critical of them. UNETE saw the necessity of developing a manual of shelter management and distributing it to mayors.

El Salvador has become the regional site of the UN inter-agency Center for Humanitarian Response, essentially a facility to enable equipment and tools to be used region-wide for disaster response.<sup>33</sup> The Facility is adjacent to the international airport. The entity is expected to play an increasing role in providing support region-wide, and facilitating knowledge transfer and information sharing.

The UN agencies in UNETE affirm having played a role in the drafting of the 2005 law, and especially in having moved the government towards taking a broader approach to disasters, i.e. from

food assistance to food security, from post-disaster urgent needs to more comprehensive early recovery and reconstruction efforts. The next disaster will test this approach. UN officials echoed their Salvadoran counterparts in expressing frustration with the narrow scope of disaster management thus far. In past instances, they affirm, it was unclear who was in charge in the government once the emergency phase passed on to the early recovery phase. The title of the new law places protection, recuperation and mitigation on the same level, but is still far more detailed with regard to emergencies than recuperation or mitigation. Laws and regulations notwithstanding, moreover, the expanded approach will depend on the availability of human and financial resources. Typically, donors are less generous when it comes to funding recovery than urgent relief but, among UN staff in El Salvador, there is a belief that greater support could be forthcoming if the government developed more comprehensive plans for recovery and empowered local entities more.

At the regional level, the Coordination Centre for Prevention of Natural Disasters in Central America (CEPREDENAC) is a potentially important organisation for regional collaboration, data sharing and strategic planning. The word 'potential' is apt because the organisation has yet to prove a strong regional actor. Nevertheless, with international funding and increased international attention, CEPREDENAC has grown more active and become more useful to its member states. Created in 1999 and based in Panama, CEPREDENAC includes all the countries of Central America, Belize and the Dominican Republic. A Regional Plan for Disaster Reduction through CEPREDENAC provides a mechanism for member countries to propose plans, priorities and prevention/mitigation actions. The agency publishes information on all natural disasters in the region, whether or not the respective government calls a national emergency. It also holds frequent regional training workshops. Each member government pays \$30,000 which covers little more than the salaries of a small technical staff. As a technical rather than political entity, CEPREDENAC has little political influence. Its major donors are the European Union, Spain and Sweden. When donors channel funds for regional purposes, these are coordinated through CEPREDENAC. Despite the elaboration of regionally based humanitarian cooperation, CEPREDENAC is a distant

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<sup>32</sup> Interview with Raul Murillo,

<sup>33</sup> This is distinct from the UN Interagency regional support office, headquartered in Panama.

second to nationally based actions. Despite the word 'prevention' in its title, its operations are focused on disaster emergencies rather than risk or mitigation projects.

Nevertheless, some informants maintained that the organisation has been growing stronger, is better funded and may yet realise its potential for disaster coordination.



## 5. Issues of concern

Few Salvadoran or international disaster experts are genuinely optimistic about the newly reorganised system of disaster management, although all perceive the need for the law now in place or something akin to it that promotes more orderly mechanisms. There are several reasons for concern.

First, the central office of the Civil Protection Directorate is understaffed and under-resourced. Its mechanisms do not really constitute a national plan, nor has the Directorate resourced and empowered regional entities to prepare their own contingency plans. The new law contains detailed descriptions of roles and responsibilities, but does not say how they will be implemented. There is practically no budget for contingencies. More serious in the view of critics, the new law does not have sufficient powers to ensure compliance from relevant national and international actors. Thus, though it pretends to have the ability to coordinate government responses, the Directorate is too weak to really do this. This being the case, the new entity is not in a strong position to impose its plans on the stronger ministries and security forces it is supposed to coordinate.

Second, outside of a major emergency situation, the centralised planning mechanisms encompass ministry-level programmes only in name. In each ministry, as described, there are officials with long experience in disaster management affecting their areas (e.g. health, education, agriculture, public works). They feel, on the one hand, sidelined by the centralising tendencies of the Civil Protection Directorate, and on the other inadequately supported by it. Ministries operate their own programmes related to risk management and mitigation, and conduct their own separately funded training. Since the entire system depends on donor funding, most of which is neither channelled through nor monitored by the government, government oversight, by definition, is constrained. When ministries and government offices carry out the roles they have been assigned by the Law on Civil Protection, they must either find the funding themselves or, more likely, ask for donor permission to divert existing funding. This places donors in a stronger position than the government to affect priorities.

Third, performance to date does not inspire confidence. For example, one of the major responsibilities of the National Commission is to ensure that there are sufficient shelters adequately equipped when evacuation plans are put into effect. By all accounts, these shelters (*albergues*) are not in place where they may be needed and are widely reported to be substandard. Evacuations to date (minor efforts during hurricanes Felix and Dean) have not been effective. The inhabitants of coastal areas subject to flooding are regularly told to evacuate. They should not be living where they are because of the flood risk, but the poor fishermen and farmers in question have no other option. When evacuated, they always return. The government has undertaken some long-overdue improvements in the embankments of the Lempa River, which floods every year, but much more investment is needed in flood control, or the government should help residents of the area to find alternative livelihoods elsewhere.

Fourth, there is widespread concern that the system is open to politicisation and corruption. Every Salvadoran confirms the country's strong political divisions, and there are widely shared suspicions that funds are being used for political purposes. This researcher heard no allegations that the funds coming into the country and managed by the private sector association ANEP were used for purposes other than responses to the disaster. Complaints centred rather on how political interests allegedly influenced which officials (i.e. of which party) received support, and how decisions regarding funding were being made. Observers of past disasters maintained that political criteria affected the distribution of funds, even under the otherwise much-praised FIS/DL operation. Under the new law, as before, the Director and Deputy Director of Civil Protection are political appointments, not necessarily selected for expertise. Critics note what they consider a disproportionate and unnecessary role in the present system of the department governors. In El Salvador governors are appointed by the president, not elected, and governorships are seen as political rewards. Appointees have few real governing responsibilities. In the present plan, they have been given control over finances when there is a state of emergency. Governors determine which municipalities will receive relief and recovery funds.

Critics believe that this will increase partisanship in the process of disaster relief. The municipalities, on the other hand, have significant governing responsibilities and mayors are elected. They may be politically motivated in their decisions affecting disaster relief, but because they are elected they are thought to be more likely to respond to the needs of the people who vote for them.

Fifth, the structures in place for disaster response and risk management seem to be improving as the government increasingly takes these issues seriously. There is no doubt that the government accepts a responsibility to respond to its citizens' needs when disasters strike. The widespread pessimism about the future rests on the fact that what is in place is targeted to the disaster context without touching the poverty and underdevelopment which make the impacts of these disasters worse than they might otherwise be. The state has established a capacity for disaster prevention, response and early recovery. Reconstruction is more problematic. Reconstruction is understood as restoring what was there before, even if what was there is ill-suited to withstand the floods and earthquakes that will strike in the future; even if the

poor people who are evacuated and told not to return to especially vulnerable coastal areas see themselves as without options other than to return. The partial exception is in the area of health where, thanks largely to regional and internationally funded programmes, hospitals and clinics are slowly being rebuilt to withstand future disasters.

Finally, as the previous points have underscored, the entire system is inadequately funded. It is obvious that however positive the intentions of the government and however well-planned the state-based responses in the Civil Protection Directorate and ministries, the assumption that foreign funds will pay for what is undertaken weakens the whole system. The state pays only for salaries, meetings, a few vehicles and some operating funds for SNET. The various ministries may have expertise and, to a large extent, are capable of organising effective relief and recovery, but doing so requires *reprogramming* funds they have received from donors for other purposes, including funding received for longer-term disaster mitigation and/or risk analysis. Foreign donors rarely allocate disaster recovery funding to separate government ministries, the possible exception being the Ministry of Health.

## 6. Concluding notes

The national system under the COEN was unable to manage the response to the earthquakes of 2001, and did only moderately better in 2005. Subsequent analyses underscored key systemic failings: COEN lacked a fixed physical site from which to operate, the government did not give direction to the massive but uncoordinated influx of foreign assistance, too many domestic actors treated the disaster as a political opportunity.<sup>34</sup> The newly restructured system in El Salvador has not had to cope with a major disaster as yet. While hurricanes Felix and Dean caused damage, and the national system response was reasonably effective, these were minor events compared to previous and expected future disasters. This being the case, it remains to be seen how much more effective disaster response will be the next time a major storm, eruption or earthquake hits El Salvador, and whether the new commitments to prevention, risk management and mitigation elaborated in the law will be implemented.

### 6.1 The disaster–poverty link

Poverty and disasters are inextricably linked. Nowhere is this more obviously the case than in El Salvador. El Salvador's poor will continue to live in disaster-prone areas, they may have the will but do not have the means to be environmentally correct, their children are less likely to take advantage of disaster education opportunities in schools and when a disaster strikes they are more vulnerable to the diseases that accompany displacement.

The FIS/DL programme that was so effectively put to use in coping with earthquake recovery in 2001 was meant to invest in social projects on behalf of the poor, and to enlist local participation in alleviating poverty. With the advent of the earthquake, FIS/DL worked in an emergency context jointly with the National Development Agency and a multitude of local actors. It enlisted local and municipal government, NGOs, churches and citizens in recovery efforts. Salvadorans and international personnel involved in the FIS/DL-initiated projects still believe the methods they used for early anti-

poverty social investment projects and earthquake recovery would have been viable for poverty alleviation through disaster reconstruction designed for development.

In 2001 there were indications that international support could be found at the IDB-sponsored Regional Consultative meeting in Madrid, Spain, for this kind of linkage. That meeting had been turned into a fundraising gathering for the continuing needs of post-Mitch disaster reconstruction and the urgent new post-earthquake needs. The Salvadoran Local Development Network, the local counterpart to the FIS/DL, presented a document to donors entitled *Elements for the Reconstruction and Development of El Salvador: A Contribution from Civil Society*. It proposed national inter-institutional dialogue, planning, reallocation of funds and the creation of a comprehensive development programme for affected regions. The document reportedly was well-received by several European donors but, according to its sponsors, the Salvadoran government did little to define the project or encourage donor support for it. The Madrid meeting raised funds for reconstruction, as requested by the government, but did not initiate a long-term development plan and the area was again as poor or poorer as at the time of the earthquake. In 2003, a publication by the Local Development Network that looked back on the experience commented:

*Undeniably the earthquakes that struck El Salvador in the months of January and February of 2001 significantly changed the conditions of poverty of the population located in the most affected zones. An impact this strong on local and national development posed a challenge to initiate a collective effort for reconstruction that would produce transformation and development. However, we are still waiting for this coordinated and transformative effort that represents our challenge as a nation. The lack of will, boldness, leadership and understanding has allowed the moment of opportunity to pass this country by.<sup>35</sup>*

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<sup>34</sup> These views are derived from communication with Professor Richard Olsen, Florida International University, who assessed the emergency operations in 2001.

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<sup>35</sup> Red para el Desarrollo Local, *El Salvador, Desarrollo Local y Descentralización del Estado, Situación actual y*



UN, NGO and Salvadoran government experts in related ministries agree with the contention that reconstruction should not be a programme of rebuilding flawed structures. The state, however, depends on foreign funding for *all* aspects of disaster management and recovery, and even if donors increase their funding for intelligent poverty-sensitive reconstruction, disaster funding will not cover the broad national development programmes to which reconstruction efforts should be linked. Therefore, adopting a development model of reconstruction cannot be made dependent on international disaster funding; nor can the subsidy programmes now being funded for poverty alleviation substitute for a development strategy for economically stagnant parts of the country. Rather, the process must begin with a much stronger commitment by the government to development strategies that encompass the poorest areas of the country and the poorest segments of the population, strategies that take disasters into account as part of the national profile.

## 6.2 Decentralisation and participation

The 2001 earthquakes created some participatory dynamics that those involved recount with pride and regret. The regret reflects their disappointment that local vitality, international partnerships with local organisations and municipal leaders and government facilitation of municipal empowerment was not institutionalised to a greater extent. The victims of the earthquake were among the poorest in El Salvador and the regions affected included economically stagnant departments. Although the damage was vast and economic losses overwhelming, early recovery measures were surprisingly positive. This is attributed to the local-level activity that followed the earthquakes, as well as decentralised donor support. Since that time, for a variety of reasons ranging from deepening poverty and out-migration to disillusionment with political groups of all kinds, local mobilisation has been seriously weakened.

When the 2005 disasters struck local responses were more muted. UN agencies, government ministries and numerous NGOs were again on the scene to provide relief. NGOs again turned existing

projects into disaster recovery projects. While for the most part these projects had strong participatory elements, they were limited in scope. The Salvadoran state was better prepared for the combined 2005 disasters than it had been in 2001, but it had defined efficiency in terms of greater central control. Moreover, although the relief effort was better organised, the early recovery period was shorter and even less adequate. The FIS/DL on this occasion engaged in fairly narrowly defined actions related to rebuilding housing, in cooperation with the Housing Ministry. This, in fact, was its formal mandate. It encouraged participation, but did not, as before, mobilise broad local self-help. FIS/DL still exists, albeit under different donor sponsorship, and is still a programme aimed at relieving poverty. But it no longer encourages local and municipal empowerment.

There is widespread pessimism among Salvadorans regarding the potential for dynamic local mobilisation in a disaster or in general. Reportedly, few municipalities have elaborated viable disaster plans, although this is required in the new law. Only the larger cities have planning capacity and plans in place. Cities, but not small towns, have invested in prevention and preparation. People cite poverty, weak institutions, indifference, the disappearance of conflict-generation leadership and the desire of the rural poor to leave their present localities, preferably for the United States, but if not there, at least to the major cities. These are important factors. But it is also the case that municipalities, especially the poorer municipalities that cannot raise their own funding, are not otherwise being funded or empowered for local action and planning. As described above, there is the will among mayors in COMURES to make disaster prevention and mitigation a priority, and their will is shared by local institutions such as schools, churches and health centres. The funding needed to act, however, cannot wait until the next disaster strikes.

## 6.3 Deferred funding

The international community has been forthcoming, but could do more. Indeed, it cannot be said that international funds spare the government from spending its own funds; in reality, the government saves little by relying on international funding. Aside from help for immediate disaster response, most of the international funds used are already in the

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*desafios*. San Salvador, 2003. p. 216, 222-224.  
Translation by author

country or promised. Contributions and loans are simply reprogrammed from other uses with the permission of donors. Obviously, important and useful projects are either foregone or must be renegotiated to meet disaster funding needs. El Salvador has technical capacity, significant political will and experience with disasters, and should be in the vanguard of determining how to prepare and deal with them. Funding responsibilities fall both on the Salvadoran state and on donors. El Salvador is a poor country and needs international

support. Nevertheless, the heavier responsibility lies on the government to show that it is willing to use state resources for this vital purpose, and is able to use the funds effectively to buttress the capacities of Salvadorans at all levels. It is odd that a government with a strong commitment to meet the needs of its citizens in the case of disasters, in a country where disasters can be counted on to happen, should do so little to fund disaster response, risk management and mitigation.



## 7. Recommendations

### 7.1 General recommendations

The GOVERNMENT has created a legal framework and a structure to meet the challenges of disasters, including preparedness, risk management and mitigation. The system has the potential to serve the nation well in natural disasters. The government should now invest significant funds in this system at all levels.

The INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY has established good working relations separately and collectively with the government institutions involved in disaster responses, prevention, risk management and mitigation. Parts of the international community have supported ministries and strengthened their institutional capacities to manage disasters. International funding should extend beyond disaster response, and donors who now tell recipients to reprogramme existing funds for recovery purposes should, instead, make new funding available for recovery.

Together, the government and international donors should establish an approach that involves greater government willingness to use its own funding for disaster-related purposes, and a longer-term international commitment to support post-disaster recovery and disaster-related reconstruction that will protect Salvadorans in future disasters.

El Salvador's DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES do not sufficiently take disasters into account. The development planning that takes place in the government and with international support must foresee and encompass disaster planning. Reconstruction efforts following disasters should be designed so that the population – as well as the infrastructure – is physically and economically more resilient. This means that the government, as well as international agencies, should remove the distinctions drawn between disaster relief funding, poverty alleviation and development.

The palpable decline in LOCAL CAPACITIES for mobilisation, organization and self-help is lamentable. Such capacities have played essential roles in past disaster recovery. It is not too late to support local capacities for disasters, especially in the areas of risk management and preparedness.

Sensible local programmes exist on paper and are in effect in several municipalities, but usually only in the municipalities that are among the more prosperous and where disaster experience is still fresh in people's memories. Well-designed training programmes are also in place and, with funding and support, could be made available more often and to wider segments of the population. Local leadership for disaster response is present but only in a minority of communities. With national and municipal encouragement, it could be revitalised.

In a REGION as disaster-prone as Central America, regional entities should be playing a more vital role. For example, technologies for early warning are costly and should be funded through effective and competent regional bodies, rather than on a country-by-country basis. CEPREDENAC is a logical basis for regional disaster coordination. Although presently far from being able to serve regional needs, its potential should be strengthened by means both of larger national contributions and international investments.

### 7.2 Specific recommendations

- Country-wide measures should be taken to ensure that municipalities design disaster preparedness plans as they are required to do under the present law, but which few have done.
- Present investment in strengthening the banks of the Lempa River that floods yearly should be stepped up. However, as this will not be sufficient to avert serious flooding in some areas, the people who are evacuated regularly from chronically flood-prone areas need alternative income generation options elsewhere, or they will continue to return to the same conditions following each evacuation.
- The government should improve the conditions and general preparedness of the shelters now in place, and should build and equip appropriate shelters in disaster-prone areas. Nor are shelters the only option worthy of support. EL Salvador could follow the example of other countries, where disaster victims are given funds to allow

them to rent shelters or help family members who are supporting them.

- Funding should be made available from national and international sources for educational programmes throughout the country which build capacities among schoolchildren and young adults. Programmes already exist on paper to instruct school-age children about risk management and what to do in case of different kinds of disasters.
- The mayors' organisation COMURES should be supported in its efforts to improve risk management, and should be given a prominent role in post-disaster recovery and reconstruction.
- Municipal-level activity related to disaster response and recovery should be supported directly, in coordination with national-level actions and with accountability to national institutions. The roles of the various bureaucratic intermediaries should be reviewed.
- The work to repair hospitals damaged in the 2001 earthquake and to make them disaster-resistant should be accelerated. Only one is complete.
- The SNET has shown itself capable of world-class technical work in the areas of early warning and disaster prevention, and should be more generously supported, both nationally and internationally.
- Although the FIS approach has been widely criticised for frequently duplicating what should be government roles, this report has given a positive review of the FIS/DL action in 2001 and to the subsequent urging of its proponents for a link between disaster reconstruction and longer-term development. The point here is to encourage a disaster risk reduction approach – but proactively rather than reactively, as in 2001 – to public investment in infrastructure. Such an approach would go far to reduce the devastating impact disasters have and continue to have in El Salvador and the region.

## List of interviewees

Margarita Alfaro, Deputy Director, Corporation of Municipalities, COMURES

Francisco Altschul, Architect and former Deputy Mayor of San Salvador

Roberto Alvarado, Disaster Coordinator for CARE

Maria Luisa Benitez, Director of Disaster programs in the Ministry of Education

Gloria de Calles, director for disaster programs in the Ministry of Health

Sergio David Gutiérrez, Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, El Salvador

Tom Hawk, Executive Director of FIS/DL 1999-2004, former USAID official.

Roberto Linares, Director of Inter American Development Bank office, El Salvador

Luis Mendez, Former Deputy Director and Interim Director of CARE

Ivan Morales, Oficial in charge of disaster related activities, UNDP

Raul Murillo, Deputy Director of the Directorate of Civil Protection and Mitigation of Disasters, Ministry of Interior.

Mirna Perez, Focal Point for Emergencias and Disasters, Pan American Health Organization, El Salvador

Jean-Luc Poncelet, Director Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Relief office, Pan American Health Organization, Washington

Hernan Romero, Former focal point in the IDB for FIS/DL

Carlo Scaramella, Representative of the World Food Program in El Salvador

Elda Vazquez de Godoy, General Director of the Nacional Service of Territorial Studies, SNET, (with Oscar Hernandez)

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Overseas Development Institute  
111 Westminster Bridge Road  
London SE1 7JD  
UK

Tel: +44 (0)20 7922 0300

Fax: +44 (0)20 7922 0399

Email: [publications@odi.org.uk](mailto:publications@odi.org.uk)

Website: [www.odi.org.uk](http://www.odi.org.uk)