

**BUILDING A 'CULTURE OF PREVENTION':
CHALLENGES TO INSTITUTIONALISING
DISASTER RISK REDUCTION IN LOCAL**

Abstract

A decentralised, partnership approach is promoted by international organisations as being the most efficient and effective way of reducing disaster risk, but little is known about the willingness or capacity of local government to develop and implement suitable policies. Disaster risk reduction (DRR) is a cross-sectoral policy domain so we need to understand how different stakeholders are involved in the policy process (Handmer and Dovers 2007). In Mexico, the National Civil Protection System is decentralised so municipal governments are ultimately responsible for disaster management and building a 'culture of prevention'.¹ Their willingness and ability to do so is shaped by their relationships with other government agencies and non-government organisations.

This paper examines how different stakeholders interact with each other and influence local disaster policy in one municipality in the State of Quintana Roo, Felipe Carrillo Puerto. The new municipal government elected in 2005 showed signs of willingness to develop and implement DRR policies but during the following three

Introduction

Despite Mexico's Federal Government commitment to integrating a risk management focus at all levels of government, municipal capacity to develop and implement DRR policies is limited by a number of broad institutional constraints, as well as p-3& Nc

Human resources are also a constraint. The process of professionalisation of government personnel in Mexico is generating greater continuity of staff at federal level, where all Civil Protection positions require civil service exams, but this is not the case at state and municipal levels. The municipal president and legislators are elected for three-year periods and Article 115

State-society relations under the PRI were clientelistic, 'based on political subordination in exchange for the discretionary granting of available public resources and services' (Heredia 1997: 4). Regular elections were held but control of civil society groups and the marginal role of opposition parties ensured that the PRI always won.

In the late 1980s this curious model of centralised, authoritarian governance began to break up in

Municipal governments are encouraged by the General Civil Protection Law (2000) to plan and implement security measures to reduce the impact of disasters. Their responsibilities are threefold: the identification of high-risk areas; precautionary measures to move and house people in temporary shelters; and the development of appropriate local legislation to increase security (Cámara de Diputados 2000: Article 39). A municipal Civil Protection director is appointed to carry out these activities.

It is unclear, however, how municipalities should reduce risks –as opposed to disasters– with their own limited resources. Additional resources for DRR are available from the federal government through its disaster prevention fund (FOPREDEN) but proposals are considered on a case-by-case basis, and municipal governments lack the human or administrative capacity to put together a project on their own. Here, then, they also need state government assistance. Federal government support to municipalities is also much stronger once an emergency or disaster has been declared.

Disaster management is, in theory, highly participatory, with policies and planning carried out by a Municipal Civil Protection Council, made up of directors of key government departments plus representatives from the business sector and civil society. However, the willingness of Civil Protection directors to consider the needs of the most vulnerable communities and involve social groups in decisions taken by the Civil Protection Council depends on the level of public support.⁴ Active, broad-based public interest groups pressing for government action to reduce disaster risk are a rarity in Mexico, and community organisations, particularly in poor municipalities, have more pressing day-to-day needs related to basic services (access to drinking water, healthcare and education), employment and crime. Unless civil society organises to demand changes in disaster policy, it is unlikely that governments will take the initiative. As Andrew Maskrey (1989: 87) explains: '[governments] respond more to political pressure than to reasoned arguments to change their policies, and that pressure can best be exerted by those who suffer the effects of disaster'.

⁴ Interview with Marco Castillo, director of Ayuda en Acción in Mexico, Cuernavaca, 19th June 2008.

*Emily Wilkinson, Building a 'culture of prevention': challenges to
institutionalising DRR in local development in Mexico
Aon Benfield UCL Hazard Research Centre, Disaster Studies Working Paper 21, February 2009*

the season, then every 24 hours and more frequently as a hurricane approaches. NGOs and local associations are invited to these meetings. In Felipe Carrillo Puerto the attendance rate is high compared to that in other municipalities in the region, partly due to the fact that many NGOs, cooperatives and other business associations are based in the municipal capital, also called Felipe Carrillo Puerto. NGOs also participate actively in the Rural Sustainable Development Council where longer-term decisions are taken about investments in rural productive activities. Unlike the Rural Sustainable Development Council, though, in Civil Protection committee meetings, non-government members do not have a vote so their participation in policy is limited to suggestions. In practice, committee meetings were not held regularly during the 2005-2008 administration so their voices were even less strong.

Hurricane Dean was the most recent hurricane to affect this central region of Quintana Roo, making landfall on the Yucatan Peninsula on 21st August 2007 as a powerful Category 5 storm causing significant damage to crops, housing, and public infrastructure, particularly in the south of Felipe Carrillo Puerto and in the neighbouring municipality of Othón P. Blanco. The Red Cross, Caritas, and UNDP were among the first to reach many rural communities, and two days later government aid was distributed in affected areas. The emergency response was quick but inefficient due to lack of communication and coordination between aid organisations and with the municipal government. According to UNDP promoter Ríger Borges, each organisation wanted to distribute its own supplies separately, using different methodologies for assessing the needs of communities. Current Civil Protection director Saucedo, who was working in a voluntary emergency response group at the time, claims that some affected communities did not receive any aid despite making repeated demands. In Noh Bec, a forestry locality in the south of Felipe Carrillo Puerto, by contrast, a community representative explained that they received so much that eventually they had to put a sign up on the main road saying 'no more aid please'. They felt that other communities, including Mahahual, a coastal village in Othón P. Blanco, needed the help more than them.

Lack of government leadership and planning contributed to poor coordination in aid distribution. The municipal president is head of the committee for hurricanes, but before and after the

emergency he had to leave the capital and visit communities around the municipality to show his concern. The Civil Protection director, who should have coordinated response efforts, had more operational than organisational skills and was out clearing roads, so no one was left in charge of

had been done to address this vulnerability. Hurricane Dean was particularly destructive in María Elena, with winds reaching 300km/hour and sea levels rising two metres destroying the houses of nearly all 40 families. Damage to fishing equipment was limited, however, thanks to effective organisation and an efficient evacuation plan that was set in motion 24 hours before the hurricane, with families taking all motors, nets and other equipment to safer ground. Eight hours before the hurricane hit, the whole community had been safely evacuated (Moya 2008).

The UNDP programme UNDP-COMPACT began supporting sustainable lobster fishing in María Elena in 2005 but the project was seriously affected by Hurricane Wilma later that year. Following a damage and needs-assessment, UNDP decided to begin working with the community to reduce disaster risk, by setting up an emergency committee, developing a local emergency plan, and assigning US\$20,000 to reactivate productive activities. The Cozumel fishing cooperative, based in María Elena, decided to use these funds to set up a revolving fund that has since grown with money received by the community from the federal government. 'The fund is used to reactivate fishing activities after disasters so we do not have to wait for government assistance, which often arrives too late', explains cooperative vice president José Canto.⁹ This reflects an interesting shift in community-government relations: from the dependency and paternalism typical of rural Mexico, to greater independence and a better understanding of how to make demands on government. The cooperative has established good relationships with municipal governments of different parties in Felipe Carrillo Puerto and the fishermen's home island of Cozumel, where many of their family members have stayed to work in tourism. It has successfully accessed resources from different levels of government to support fishing activities, including through the joint federal-state-municipal government fund 'Alianza Municipalizada' to set up a shop and sell lobsters' tails directly to hotels and restaurants, cutting out the intermediaries.

The community of María Elena also proved to be less dependent on state government support

resist hurricane winds.¹⁰ A house built before the hurricane in María Elena by the federal authority of Sian Ka'an Reserve, remained standing during 'Dean' so could be used as a temporary shelter while fishermen took advantage of state government resources to repair damaged boats and rebuild their own houses. They hope that soon they will have enough savings to be able to raise their houses on to stilts.

Intra-municipal government relations

Almost all municipal government departments are represented on the Civil Protection committee and directors are expected to attend committee meetings. In Felipe Carrillo Puerto over 30 elected officials and directors attended the first meeting of the committee in 2005, an extremely high turnout. Discussion at these meetings focused on logistics and equipment needed for different disaster preparedness and response activities. During these planning sessions directors were cooperative, putting their staff and equipment at the disposition of the Civil Protection director to coordinate communications campaigns, preparation of the shelters, evacuations and damage assessments, amongst other activities. After the first hurricane meeting was convened, though, subsequent meetings were only held when a hurricane was approaching the peninsula.

Weaknesses in pre-hurricane planning were revealed in the aftermath of Hurricane Dean. The poorly coordinated emergency response was, as already discussed, partly caused by lack of leadership in aid distribution. In addition, according to the Civil Protection director at the time, Carlos Quiñones, there was also insufficient heavy machinery and human resources for response activities.¹¹ This may be because other government departments were not as willing to donate resources as they had implied i(a)-ha3m08nd

relationships with other municipal directors deteriorated as a result. Towards the end of the 2005-2008 administration the municipal government became ineffective and the last annual municipal government report was never written.¹²

Inter-governmental relations

On winning the municipal elections in Felipe Carrillo Puerto the PRD faced the challenge of working with a state government run by the PRI and a federal government run by the National Action Party (PAN). These relationships were problematic in some but not all aspects of disaster prevention and response.

The municipal Civil Protection director was new to the role and lacked management experience. Capacity development programmes were provided by the state Civil Protection department, supported by the General Department of Civil Protection in Mexico City, including advice on how to organise and carry out damage assessments, on the operating rules of FONDEN, and on other aspects of SINAPROC. The state government also supported municipal Civil Protection in its communications campaigns, supplying it with leaflets and posters to distribute in communities. This is one of the mandated tasks of state Civil Protection and also an area of inter-governmental relations that does not appear to have been influenced by political conflict.

Application of the hurricane early warning system in Quintana Roo was not affected by politics either. Instructions and advice to the public on what to do at different stages of alert are standardised throughout the country and disseminated by municipal government departments through their committee structures, and in coordination with the media. The operation of this system for Hurricane Dean was extremely effective in Quintana Roo with municipal governments respecting the State's decisions on when and where to issue warnings, unlike neighbouring Yucatán where there were disagreements between coastal municipal governments and the state government on how to apply the system in areas that were not directly in the hurricane's path.

¹² Interview with Basilio Velasquez, UNDP local promoter, Felipe Carrillo Puerto, 23rd May 2008.

*Emily Wilkinson, Building a 'culture of prevention': challenges to
institutionalising DRR in local development in Mexico*
Aon Benfield UCL Hazard Res

political favouritism played a part in the allocation of reconstruction funds from FONDEN and pointed out that neighbouring municipality José María Morelos, run by the PRI, received more funds, despite being less badly affected than Felipe Carrillo Puerto. There are many different

important and has not been given enough attention in the municipality, but Civil Protection never had its own budget in Felipe Carrillo Puerto. This limited its capacity to implement DRR policies and reduced its leverage with other departments. The large sums of money and experts that flowed in after Hurricane Dean undermined the municipal director's authority even more.

Finally, the lack of capacity and organisational experience of the Civil Protection director made it difficult for him to coordinate other agencies and access funds from higher levels of government for prevention activities.

Despite these inter-institutional problems, the ongoing presence of NGOs working on sustainable development projects in the region is helping to develop a 'culture of prevention' within communities, as can be seen in the coastal community of María Elena. Integration of DRR into sustainable development planning and NGO projects would seem to be necessary, as well as more targeted DRR interventions.

Konrad, H.W. (1985) 'Fallout of the wars of the chacs: the impact of hurricanes and implications for pre-hispanic Quintana Roo maya processes', In M. Thompson, M.T. Garcia and F.J. Kense (eds.) *Status, Structure, and Stratification: Current Archaeological Reconstructions*, Calgary: University of Calgary, 321-330.

Maskrey, A. (1989) *Disaster Management: A Community Based Approach*, Oxford: Oxfam.

Moya, X. (2008) 'Los aprendizajes del huracán 'Dean' para el Programa conjunto de Manejo de Riesgos de Desastre en el Sureste de México', *Experiencias Compartidas* No. 3, Madrid: Ayuda en Acción.

Rowland, A.M. (2001) 'Population as a determinant of local outcomes under decentralization: illustrations from small municipalities in Bolivia and Mexico', *World Development* 29(8), 1373-1389.

Segob (2008) 'Programa Nacional de Protección Civil 2008-2012', Mexico City: Secretaría de Gobernación.