
Health Information for Disaster Preparedness in Latin America and the Caribbean

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Domain in Digital Data and Information for Science
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Latin America and the Caribbean have High Disaster Risk



- Volcanic eruptions: Armero Colombia, Ecuador
- Earthquakes: Mexico, El Salvador
- Displaced populations: Colombia
- El Niño



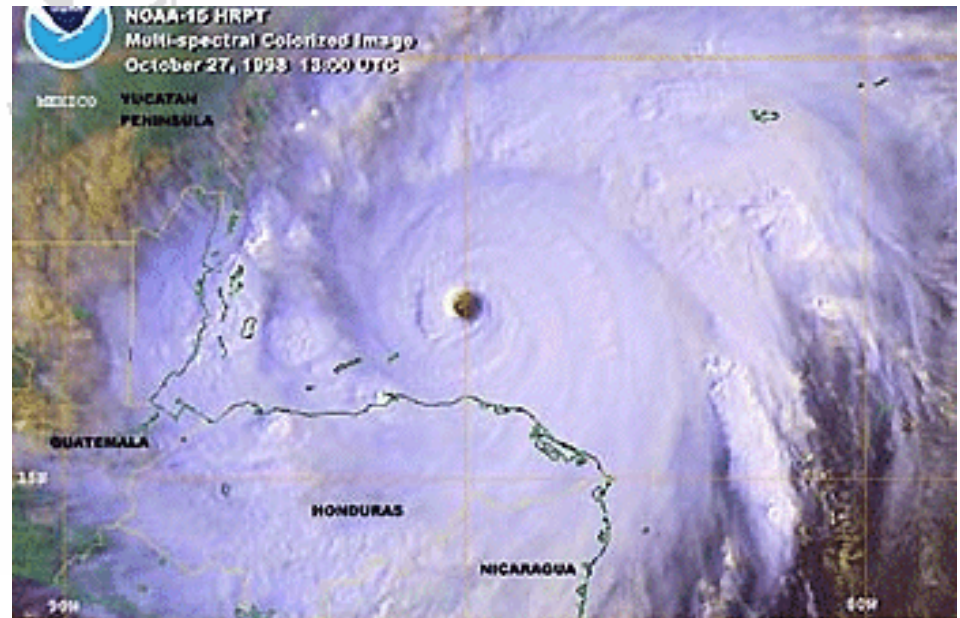
HURRICANE MITCH



The Role of Information

Hurricane Mitch

- Hurricane Mitch – October 1998
 - 9,000 killed
 - 13,000 injured
 - 3 million displaced
 - \$5 billion in damages



MITCH and the Internet!

- **The first major “Internet-dependent” disaster in the Americas:**
 - **A powerful tool for coordination.**
 - **A fertile ground for rumors.**
- **The Regional Disaster Internet Network has proven its value for direct communication among Central American experts.**



Disaster Management

- **Relies on a multitude of scientific groups that don't communicate with each other:**
 - **Hospital building codes need input from meteorologists and volcano or earthquake experts, as well as engineers, architects, builders and physicians.**





Managing Natural Disasters
is
Managing Information

Reliable information is the most valued commodity before and after a disaster.



Disaster Information Users

- **Academics and scientists**
- **Policy decision makers**
- **Disaster and risk managers**



Main Issues

- **Wealth of information but little is accessible**
 - **Professionals in developing countries have a wealth of information that would be easily applicable to neighboring countries, but very little has been written down.**
 - **When written, the information is not circulated.**
 - **When circulated it is not in a format understandable to operational or decision-level professionals.**



On the other hand...

- **Increasing availability of information, but of poor quality or not applicable to developing world context**
- **The best available written information in developing countries is not peer-reviewed**
- **Limited access is becoming a myth**



A project to facilitate access to decision makers

- **PAHO/WHO**
- **NLM**
- **CRID**



PAHO/WHO

- **Pan American Health Organization- regional office of the World Health Organization**
- **Founded in 1902**
- **2500 staff members**
- **Technical cooperation and knowledge broker for its member countries**



US National Library of Medicine-NLM

- **The world reference health information center**
- **The most consulted medical database on the Internet**
- **Assists in obtaining access to scientific information through:**
 - **Free access to information**
 - **Training**
 - **Technical support for connecting to Internet**
 - **Expertise sharing**



Regional Disaster Information Center



- **An NGO established in 1990 by PAHO in Costa Rica**
- **14,000 documents on disaster-related topics, mostly non peer reviewed**
- **6,000 end-users**
- **Multi-agency (ISDR, Government, Federation of Red Cross, MSF,..) and multidisciplinary**
- **The main source of documents in Spanish**
- **Provides copies to users**

CRID *Database available on*

- **Internet**
- **LILACS CD-ROM**
- **BIBLIO-DES -- selected bibliography**
- **DES-INDEX -- comprehensive bibliography**
- **Latin American and Caribbean Center on Health Sciences Information (BIREME)**



Results of the Project in Central America

- **Multi-sectoral access and use of the Internet**
- **Disaster managers and health documentation specialist trained in using and distributing selected information**
- **6 documentation centers with equipment upgrade for better access to Internet**
- **1000 digitalized full-text documents**



Additional Results

- **Increased circulation**
- **Improved selection process according to user demands**
- **Improved thesaurus**



NLM - PAHO Collaborative Venture

- **A perfect match:**
 - **NLM: advanced information technology**
 - **PAHO: experience in risk management in Latin America**
 - **Highly motivated countries and institutions**
- **Their respective databases are complementary**



Conclusions

- **Scientific information on disasters exists, but with limited accessibility.**
- **The most directly applicable scientific information is found in the same developing countries, but most of it is unpublished.**
- **A simple structure with good partners can make information available to a large number of low-income professionals.**



Conclusions

- **Active dissemination of quality information free of charge is:**
 - **the most cost effective disaster reduction activity,**
 - **a way to empower nationals,**
 - **a powerful means to reduce the gap between rich and poor,**
 - **a method of reducing the impact of a disaster.**

