

**27th Annual Journalists and Editors Workshop on Latin America
and the Caribbean**

“Disaster Risk Reduction in Inter-American Affairs”

Introduction

On April 30-May 1, 2009, the Latin American and Caribbean Center (LACC) at Florida International University and the University of Florida’s Center for Latin American Studies (CLAS) organized the 27th Annual Journalists and Editors Workshop on Latin America and the Caribbean. The organizers invited more than 100 journalists, editors, policy-makers and scholars from throughout the US, Latin America and Europe to participate in a two-day forum in Miami on disaster risk reduction strategies, the challenges of reporting on natural disasters, and media politics in inter-American affairs.

Along with LACC and CLAS, a number of other institutes, organizations and universities supported and co-sponsored the workshop: USAID/OFDA; the US Department of Education Title VI Grant; ExxonMobil Inter-America; the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies and the School of Journalism at Michigan State University; FIU’s School of International and Public Affairs, Miami European Union Center, Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy and Citizenship Studies, School of Journalism and Mass Communication, and International Media Center; and the Miami Herald. The workshop would not have been possible without their help and support.

The main topics considered at the 2009 Journalists and Editors (J&E) Workshop were the increased vulnerability caused by the global economic crisis, disasters and regime change, disasters and migration, the challenges of reporting on natural disasters, and future disasters awaiting Latin America. The workshop also featured a keynote speech by Andrew Maskrey of the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction. The main themes and arguments of these presentations are summarized below.

Global Economic Crisis

The first panel discussed the challenges and windows of opportunities the global economic crisis has created for disaster risk reduction initiatives and strategies in Latin America and the Caribbean and for media reporting during disaster events. How does the global economic crisis deepen existing levels of vulnerability? Is the region prepared to

deal with the consequences of the global economic crisis? The three panelists discussed all of these questions with a mix of concern and optimism.

Ricardo Zapata took a multilevel approach to the global economic crisis, examining its many dimensions – economic, financial, institutional and structural, as well as ethical and philosophical. The world today faces a number of hazards and menaces, some physical, biological or related to climate change and others financial, economic and commercial. The latter are linked to the global economic cycle as well as sociopolitical factors related to violence and unrest. These hazards interact, influence each other, and generate negative and positive synergies, Zapata noted. He also pointed out the complex link between poverty, disasters and development and stressed the importance of rescuing the notion of planning in Latin America and the Caribbean. Zapata identified new challenges for Latin American countries in dealing with the global economic crisis: reduce the impact of international shocks in the region, work on adaptation and mitigation strategies with regard to climate change, increase governability and transparency, and ensure the participation of actors at every level of society.

Dan Grech argued that the global economic crisis is really a “debt crisis.” The world, especially the United States, borrowed too much money without being able to pay it back. Two parallel developments set the stage for this crisis: increasing levels of securitization and the radical expansion of the global pool of capital. The Latin America and Caribbean region was hit by a decline in commodities prices and international demand. This has led to devaluation policies that have deepened the crisis for the poor and middle classes. While recovery in Latin America will lag behind the United States, Brazil and Chile appear to be in the best position to overcome the effects of the global crisis.

Andrew Levy noted that the Caribbean, and Jamaica in particular, is critically exposed to catastrophes but is ill prepared for these kinds of events. Hurricanes, earthquakes and floods are the main natural threats, but corruption also represents a structural problem in the region. The region’s governments often fail to give preparation and mitigation practices the importance they deserve. The challenge is how to include these practices in long-term economic planning. This is the only real way to reduce the cost of catastrophes in the region.

Pablo González pointed out that risk is part of the development process, and that there is no risk where there is no development. Disaster prevention and mitigation are superficial priorities, he argued; there is an urgent need for national platforms to develop mechanisms for dealing with risk management at all levels of the economic and productive sectors. González described a vicious cycle of poverty, disaster and environmental degradation, and concluded by urging governments and international organizations to view disasters as a window of opportunity to promote mitigation and risk management instead of focusing exclusively on preparation and prevention.

Disasters and Regime Change: Cuba, Haiti, Mexico, Guatemala, Nicaragua and the United States

There was consensus among the presenters on this panel that the connection between disasters and regime change has become more evident in recent decades. Disasters have led to overtly political consequences in Latin America and the Caribbean, and can help us gain a more holistic understanding of the significance of disasters in inter-American affairs. The presenters used six cases in an attempt to answer such key questions as, is there a link between disasters and regime change? How may disasters accelerate political change? Can disasters hinder regime change by reinforcing the current regime?

One of the challenges of discussing disasters and regime change, Richard Olson noted, is that it requires us to think of disasters in the long term. The political effects of disasters take time to manifest themselves. The 1972 Nicaraguan earthquake in 1972 is a case in point; the political consequences would not be seen until seven years later, with the downfall of the Somoza regime.

Vince Gawronski argued that while disasters have political consequences, they rarely cause regime change. Such a link is extraordinary difficult to establish, he maintained. Retrospective analysis often requires examining whether a disaster fits into the historical trajectory of a nation state. Disasters do not occur in a vacuum; we must take into account the physical, social, economic and political contexts to differentiate between political effects and true regime change. As examples, Gawronski compared the Valdivia earthquake in Chile, which did cause regime change, with Hurricane Mitch in Honduras and various natural disasters in Cuba, which did not.

Ricardo Trotti looked at the destabilizing effects of drug trafficking and its effects on news reporting. Drug trafficking is not only a security problem but also a challenge to institutions and democracy, he observed. It is a clear example of globalization, erasing distinctions between countries that produce, transit and consume. He focused his discussion on Colombia and Mexico, where drug trafficking has led to especially high levels of violence. Although journalists should not be blamed for a certain degree of self-censure, Trotti argued, the media should search for new strategies to cover the problem as well as better editorial criteria.

Regime change caused by disasters in the short and medium terms, Hugh Gladwin argued, is a result of failed government response that leads public blame of the administration. Gladwin looked at three cases: Hurricane Wilma (Mexico), Hurricane Katrina (United States) and disaster events in Cuba. Governments must do three things to avoid pressures leading to regime change, he argued: first, mobilize evacuation plans in an integrated chain from the top (the state, federal and planning level) down (the local,

neighborhood level); second, recognize the critical role of communication channels; and third, marshal economic resources in collaboration with the private sector. Mexico responded effectively to Hurricane Wilma by pursuing an active mobilization strategy (including evacuation plans and infrastructure planning), centralizing emergency power into a single agency and freeing up economic resources.

Jacqueline Charles developed a retrospective analysis of the situation in Haiti before the disaster events of 2008. Soaring food and fuel prices resulted in riots across the country, with protesters demanding the government's ouster. While these riots were not a natural disaster they are a good example of the country's fragility and vulnerability and of how disasters may lead to anger and demand for change. After the riots, the country was left off guard for the storms and hurricanes that would follow in less than thirty days.

Keynote Speaker: Andrew Maskrey, Coordinator, ISDR Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction, United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, Geneva

Andrew Maskrey talked of the need to study risk in relative terms, taking into consideration such factors as the probability of mortality or total economic loss. If we look at risk in relative terms, Latin America and the Caribbean is one of the most risk-prone regions of the world.

Some of these risks we can't do anything about, he acknowledged, such as tsunamis or major volcanic activity near a big city. It is difficult to plan for catastrophic events such as these. In other cases, however, there is a window of opportunity for anticipating small and medium disaster situations.

Historically, frequent but low-intensity losses are associated with smaller scale hazards. Historical disaster records make it easier to identify these areas. If we are able to work on and resolve these recurring low intensity events, Maskrey argued, we will be in a better position to resolve risks associated with more extreme events. In addition, he pointed out, some risks are socially constructed. Natural hazards often have some level of human factor which not only deepens vulnerability but also worsens their impact.

Theories of disasters and risks, Maskrey noted, have gradually incorporated the natural and social sciences to produce a more complex and holistic understanding of the factors involved. The natural sciences approach tends to consider disasters as inevitable and unpredictable, while the social sciences emphasize the notion of vulnerability as a socially constructed condition and introduce the concept of responsibility. A third approach assumes a more holistic vision of risk, addressing not only hazards and vulnerabilities but also losses and mitigation strategies.

Maskrey raised concern about the accuracy and reliability of data related to disaster events, in Latin America and globally. Statistics show lower mortality in the region with increased development; in other words, 30 years ago a flood in an area with no roads, health facilities or disaster preparedness would have caused more deaths than the same flood today. Nevertheless, he cautioned, development exposes more economic assets and capacities, and the region has been slow to develop risk reduction strategies.

Maskrey concluded by emphasizing the need for accountability and legal responsibility in risk reduction strategies and called for greater transparency, despite powerful lobbying by economic interests in sensitive areas.

Migration through the Lens of Disasters

This panel considered patterns and flows of migration and population movements throughout the region and their link to disaster events. The participants took a multidisciplinary approach to the topic, comparing internal and external population movements and highlighting policy challenges.

Following disasters, Manuel Orozco argued, migration may occur across national borders or in the form internal displacement. No particular assumptions can be made regarding the possibility of migration after the occurrence of a disaster, although internal displacement is more likely, he noted. Most international migrations respond primarily to economic factors, but in the case of Mexico and some Central American and Caribbean countries there is a closer relationship between disasters and migration. In particular, immigrant associations have been very active after disasters to increase the flow of remittances home.

Carl Bankston III examined migration after Hurricane Katrina, which, he argued, merely exacerbated existing trends. New Orleans had not been a center for migration since 1959, when many Hondurans moved to the area after a hurricane in their home country. Since then, the area's Honduran population has grown tremendously, along with immigrants from other Latin American countries. In general, Bankston argued, this group constitutes an invisible community as nearly half is undocumented. This migration has led to an increasing demand for Spanish-language media.

As Christopher Gascon pointed out, different environmental processes and events produce different types of displacements and impacts on populations. When communities are extremely vulnerable, the resettlement option needs to be considered. Important to this issue is the need to move from reactive to proactive ways of dealing with situations and to encourage local approaches to migration, climate change and environmental degradation. The link between migration and development, Gascon argued, including

environmental migration, deserves to be strengthened to make local livelihoods more sustainable and reduce environmental degradation. Natural hazards by themselves do not cause disasters, he noted; just as important is the existence of exposed, vulnerable and unprepared populations. Human activities such as land change, environmental exploitation and unplanned settlements exacerbate risk levels. Adaptation and disaster risk reduction can decrease the need for migration or can involve migration as a strategy. There is a need to identify and test new frameworks to manage potential movements considering both sides of the environmental and migration nexus.

The Challenges of Reporting on Disasters

This panel discussed challenges facing the media in reporting disasters, taking into consideration issues of training, preparedness and psychological and social support. Participants highlighted the importance of the media in raising awareness of risk reduction strategies in disaster-prone areas, as well as in promoting social responsibility during the aftermath of a disaster. They also emphasized the relation between the media and government as part of the challenge of reporting disasters.

Patrick Butler discussed Hurricane Mitch and the damage it left in Honduras and Nicaragua, noting the many challenges for the media. One important consideration in such coverage is identifying environmental, social and population issues that may increase the severity of disasters when they happen, but pre- and post-disaster reporting is not as appealing as covering the disaster itself, he noted. Butler pointed out that there is a perception in newspapers and other broadcasting media that it takes a great deal of investment to cover those kinds of stories.

Juan Tamayo began by talking about his experience covering disasters in Central America, especially Hurricane Mitch. He stressed the importance of understanding the background of vulnerability that leads to disasters over and over again through the years. The media should be aware of the impacts of past situations, he argued, and include the institutional side of disasters (emergency agencies, leadership, preparation, volunteer networks). Tamayo concluded by appealing to journalists to return to disaster-hit areas during the aftermath to examine whether vulnerable areas have been rebuilt or the government has worked on risk reduction strategies.

Susana González asserted that covering disasters is perhaps one of the most difficult and complex activities for journalists. She focused her presentation specifically on Argentina, arguing that Argentine society is both inexperienced and unprepared with regard to disaster events. She provided several examples, including the 1990s terrorist attacks on the Israeli Embassy and AMIA and incidents of flooding and mudslides. Especially critical, González noted, is the lack of training within communication

agencies. Disasters require the centralization of information and the combined action of media outlets and public officials, she concluded.

Manuel Chávez examined the issue of health and the news media. As a case study, he cited the way Mexico dealt with the imminent H1N1 flu pandemic and the importance of the country's partnership with the US and Canada. This partnership has two main dimensions: prosperity and security. While the former has been criticized as looking out solely for business interests, the security component -health, security, aviation, law enforcement, intelligence, science and technology, etc.- is also important. Especially in this case, he noted, the protective prevention response protocol signed by Mexico in 2005 was tremendously instrumental in handling the flu outbreak. The media plays a critical role in health communication, Chávez argued, as they are part of the first responders' network. Challenges for governments include public health preparedness, mass dispensation of medicine, notification networks and public education, among others. He concluded by calling for improved training of journalists as well as an increase in their commitment to raise awareness of risks before a disaster occurs.

Closing Session: A Preview of Destruction: 10 Worst Latin American Disasters to Come. Lead Discussant: Juan Pablo Sarmiento, Florida International University

Sarmiento began the discussion by noting that more and more disasters are being recorded in recent decades. This increase is due in part to new technological advancements in information systems as well as more understanding, awareness and interest in the topic. It is also a result, however, of increased hazards and vulnerabilities, such as population growth, poverty, land availability, land tenancy and use management, marginalization and environmental degradation.

The next 10 disasters in the region, the panel argued, can be defined broadly as: 1) violence, 2) technological problems, 3) landslides and land movements, 4) volcanic activity, 5) climate variability, 6) extreme climate conditions and climate change, 7) tsunamis, 8) tropical storms and hurricanes, 9) seismic events, and 10) disease outbreaks.

Violence poses a tremendous hazard to the region, causing approximately 185,000 deaths in Latin America and the Caribbean each year. Colombia alone reported 38,070 deaths in one year, twice the toll from the volcanic eruption of 1985.

The issue of technological problems has generated a great deal of interest during recent decades, but information on this topic is scarce in the region. We see in Latin America and the Caribbean a paradox between moderate death rates and the great numbers of people affected by disaster events. This suggests a lack of regulation and control in these

countries -where accidents do happen- but the consequences of mismanagement are only seen and reflected in the affected community.

More visible are natural disasters such as landslides and land movements. Few initiatives have addressed this problem even though they imply huge economic and infrastructure losses. This type of disaster shows the ability of manmade actions to aggravate natural circumstances in cases of poor land management, a lack of planning strategies and defective infrastructure design.

Volcanic activity in the region is also a serious problem, especially in the so-called Pacific Ring, which has been extensively settled due to the land's fertility. It is important to keep in mind that volcanoes may have prolonged periods of dormancy but still remain active. One example is the Chaiten volcano in Chile, which erupted recently with terrible consequences. Interesting to note is the number of cities located within a 30-km radius of volcanoes, including Guatemala City, San Salvador, Quito, Arequipa, Managua and San José.

Important developments in science and mathematical models have allowed a better understanding of climate variability, including extremes such as floods and droughts. Central America in particular has cyclical processes, especially between the months of October and November. New risks are created all the time when communities are exposed to unstable socio-environmental conditions.

One of the most important examples of climate extremes and climate change is "El Niño." No other event has the same potential to cause global effects. Among its consequences are extreme droughts and flooding and deepening social, environmental and economic vulnerabilities. Surprisingly, the issue is still being treated as a "contingency problem" and is not included in national planning strategies.

There is a perception that tsunamis pose little danger to Latin America and the Caribbean, despite historical experiences of this type of disaster in the region. A tragic example is the case of the port of Callao in Lima, which was destroyed by a tsunami in 1746. Another case occurred in Valdivia, Chile in 1960, when a tsunami followed seismic activity and had devastating effects. In this case approximately 4,000 people were killed, not all of them in Chile – 138 people died in Japan, 61 in Hawaii and 32 in the Philippines.

A look at hurricanes in the region leads to a discussion of long-term climate trends and an increase in vulnerability in the region. Although building codes and infrastructure materials are now more resistant to these kinds of events, the region's "constructed vulnerability" exposes greater numbers of people to these hazards. The adverse social conditions created are not proportional to the measures being taken to control them.

In the case of seismic events, too, it is important to consider processes of urbanization, since much of the region's population growth does not necessarily abide by planning processes. Many cases illustrate this, including Bogotá, Caracas, Guatemala, Lima, Mexico, Nicaragua, Santiago, San Juan and Valparaiso. These are examples in which the central government, large population centers and economic activities are concentrated in one area. Seismic events in these regions produce not only physical damage but also social, political, economic and environmental consequences.

Finally, disease outbreaks take a high toll not only in deaths, but also in economic, political and food security considerations. The Latin American and Caribbean population is at risk from such threats as pandemic influenza, Ebola, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and mad cow disease, among others. In these kinds of outbreaks, the factors to be considered include the population at risk, the economy, food safety, employment, tourism and the environment.

In conclusion, Sarmiento argued that each of these 10 potential disasters is feasible, viable and has already been experienced in the region in some way. Social responsibility for disaster risk reduction is essential in confronting these threats. The communications media and journalists have the ability to call attention to the risks by denouncing social conditions and demanding accountability.

Richard Olson emphasized the need to commit to and implement disaster risk reduction strategies. One fundamental problem, he noted, is that hazards operate in decades and politicians operate in months or years. All around the world, there is a fundamental mismatch in hazard recurrence and political timelines.

Conclusion

The 27th Annual Journalists and Editors Workshop on Latin America and the Caribbean served as a forum for addressing the primary dimensions of disaster events, regime change, the global economic crisis, migration patterns and population movements, the challenges of reporting disasters, and potential disasters to come. This final section will re-visit these themes in an effort to highlight some points of consensus among the participants.

With respect to the global economic crisis, participants seemed to agree that the crisis has many sides, including political, social, institutional, financial, structural and ethical dimensions. The economic crisis has deepened vulnerability in most countries of the region, exacerbating a vicious cycle of poverty, disaster and development. The participants agreed on the need to rescue the notion of planning in Latin America and the Caribbean to implement mechanisms for dealing with risk management.

Whether disasters may accelerate or hinder regime changes seems to be a little explored area of study. The panelists agreed that one of the challenges is the fundamental mismatch between the timeline of disasters and political decisions. Looking at the relation between disasters and regime change, it is crucial to understand that disasters do not occur in a vacuum but interact with social, political, physical and economic contexts.

With regard to migration patterns, participants pointed out the need to distinguish between internal and external patterns of migration in identifying the drivers of migration movements as well as implementing specific disaster risk reduction strategies that may mitigate migration flows.

Reporting on disasters is one of the most complex challenges facing journalists. There was consensus among the panelists that journalists and media organizations are not well trained or prepared to deal with in issues related to covering disaster events. These weaknesses lead to deficient coverage and leave few resources at the disposal of journalists who cover disasters. Nevertheless, the press has the responsibility to address and cover pre- and post-disaster situations to raise awareness among the population and government officials, and to monitor post-disaster situations.

For 27 years, LACC's annual Journalists and Editors Workshop has served as a forum for debate on the most urgent topics facing the Latin American and Caribbean region. The event has gained prestige among journalists, academic experts, government officials and a range of organizations as a unique opportunity to gain a multidisciplinary understanding of critical issues affecting the region.