



Colombia: Integrating disaster risk reduction at the local level

Sistema Nacional de Prevención y Atención de Desastres (SNPAD)

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Context

Colombia is a disaster-prone country due to its physical characteristics and concentration of economic activity in the country's mountainous areas. Risk management in Colombia is a complex issue, given the high rate of migration to urban areas, which is partly motivated by the internal conflict. It is thus necessary to take a community-based approach to risk management, based on capacity development at town and district levels.

The National Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction in Colombia is called the National System for Disaster Prevention and Response (SNPAD). It was created in 1988 by Law 46¹, which was passed in the aftermath of the 1985 volcanic eruption in Armero. This event generated lava flows, landslides and turned into a major disaster, killing 25,000 people. Learning lessons from this catastrophe, the new Law's main purpose was to define responsibilities and functions of all stakeholders involved in disaster risk reduction, management, reconstruction and recovery issues, i.e. public, private and community-based organizations.

The disaster management system was built up following a decentralization process. It is based on cooperation between national, district and local levels, following the principles of subsidiarity and complementarity. The system is based on a legal framework (Decree-Law 919 in 1989 and National Plan Decree 93 in 1998) which assigns responsibilities to each institution and organizes the system through the coordination of committees and bureaus at all levels. It is systematic because each level is firstly ruled by the relevant officer of each entity, that is to say the president, district governors and mayors.

In 2004, the SNPAD was officially designated as National Platform of Colombia, anticipating the World Conference on Disaster Reduction in Kobe in 2005.

National Platform Structure and Activities

Focal Point Institution

At national level, the Disaster Prevention and Response Office (DGPAD) coordinates the entire system through two main committees: the National Technical Committee and the National Operational Committee. Administratively the DGPAD depends on the Ministry of the Interior and Justice. It is also the official HFA focal point of Colombia.

Membership

The National Platform is made up of public, private and community-based entities. It has also set up sectoral committees, such as those on seismic and volcanic risks (supported by the National Seismological and Volcanological Network), the Technological Risk Committee or the National Hydrometeorological Network.

¹ See <http://www.dgpad.gov.co/entidad/Ley4688.pdf>

Operational practices

The SNPAD's work is mainly guided by the National Plan for Disaster Prevention and Response, which provides planning strategies and policy vision. Law 388, relating to land planning and soil use management, establishes that each town and department has to identify risk areas and define strategies and priorities to manage them according to risk types, available resources and national policies.

The national, regional and local committees meet on a regular basis.

The DGPAD plans and monitors the implementation of activities at national level, following a specific action plan. For this it consults with the SNPAD members mainly through the work of the National Operational Committee, which is coordinated by the Colombian Civil Defence, under the responsibility of the Ministry of National Defence.

The Technical and Operational committees normally meet twice a year and convene extraordinary meetings in the case of alerts or a disaster. Strategies and recommendations are adopted during every committee meeting.

Each ministry has also an office or committee in charge of disaster prevention and response.

At regional and local level, each decentralized entity has its own action plan. The regional and local committees for disaster risk prevention and response (CREPAD, CLOPAD) work differently, depending on the level of development of the entity and the commitment of the local authorities. Committees in Bogotá, Medellín or Manizales for instance have been well implemented and strengthened. They have become champions in establishing integrated disaster risk management.

A regional committee gathers all governors of the country and meets each year, headed by the regional governor and coordinated by the DGPAD. These regional meetings, which gather stakeholders from different administrative levels, also take place in case of a disaster or emergency.

Activities & Results

Several projects have been implemented in the last few years. According to the law for land use planning for example, all cities and municipalities must draw up hazard and risk maps in order to better manage risks, e.g. when considering the construction of buildings. Local budgets also have to dedicate specific resources to implement disaster risk reduction and mitigation activities.

The following provides an overview of some key activities and results that have been achieved:

- 1) Ensuring that disaster risk reduction is a national priority:** For some years, the President of Colombia and his ministers, through their membership of the National Platform, have been strongly committed to advocating disaster risk reduction to all officials and stakeholders, and have taken the message around the country to different towns and regions.
- 2) Improving the information & research system:** Colombia has been progressively strengthening its technical capacity to monitor and study natural hazards and risks. Many experts are now spreading this knowledge by working within government institutions, local authorities, universities, research centers and private consulting firms. Information and data gathered from seismological and hydrometeorological

networks at local and national levels have been integrated in specific analyses, aiming to model and/or anticipate risks and define early warning situations.

- 3) Strengthening of the role of women in disaster risk reduction:** A programme called “*Guardianas de las laderas*” (*Guards of the hillsides*) has been launched in Manizales. Mothers with sole responsibility for their family have been hired by local government to help implement risk mitigation activities. They are for instance responsible for waste management in the city, keeping evacuation roads and river beds clean. This programme has been replicated throughout the country and has produced excellent results in reducing risks.
- 4) Stimulating participation of civil society:** Disaster risk management has become a politically neutral issue in Colombia. The issue concerns all parties involved in the armed conflict which has affected the country for years. Disaster risk reduction is particularly taking hold in areas such as the Antioquia department (especially in the city of Medellín), in the Montes de María on the Atlantic Coast, in the Llanos Orientales, where local contingency plans are being developed, and mitigation and capacity building is being implemented with support from the United Nations.

A good practice: Integrating Disaster Risk Reduction at the local level

Since the above-mentioned Armero disaster, the authorities of Colombia have become more and more aware of mainstreaming disaster risk management into development policies through a systematic approach, focused on prevention and reconstruction. In Colombia, disaster risk reduction is now considered a national priority. This process can thus be considered as a good practice.

The decentralization of decision-making power represents a turning-point in the country, providing more autonomy to local authorities to make progress on disaster risk reduction. The mayors became responsible for disaster risk and emergency management. When a disaster happens, following the principle of subsidiarity, it is only if the disaster's magnitude goes beyond the local area that department authorities become responsible for initiating actions. This principle escalates up to the national level.

Many cities have actively taken up these new responsibilities. The administrators of Bogotá, Manizales and Medellín have shown a very strong political commitment. Local governments of other big cities have established disaster risk management systems and coordinating bodies. These systems are part of the national system for disaster management. In every city this process has been based on an appropriate legal framework, with strong support from the population.

The initiative: Reducing disaster risks in Medellín

Medellín is the second most populous city in Colombia, with 1.8 million inhabitants. It is made up of many poor districts characterized by a high population density and situated amid steep hills (Medellín is located at an altitude of 1,500 metres). Floods and landslides occur each year, and earthquakes often strike the area. In 1987, 500 people died because of a landslide and 3,500 lost their houses. This disaster raised awareness in the population, which realized that Medellín had to become more resilient to disasters. Thus the Local System for Prevention, Response and Recovery was created, within the framework of the city's Development Plan.

The Local Committee adopted Medellín's Development Plan after public consultations. It integrates disaster risk prevention and management. Thanks to recent changes within

the national constitution, which aimed to devolve decision-making to local authorities, it has been easier to implement disaster risk reduction strategies at local level. Local governments have since been accumulating new experiences in spearheading disaster risk reduction issues.

The initiative to develop a disaster management strategy at a local level in Medellín was coordinated by the Mayor and an executive body made up of 12 sectoral committees (education, planning, etc.). They succeeded in integrating risk management strategies into local development plans and economic and social plans in general. Specific resources from the local budget have been dedicated to make the whole system work.

Many stakeholders participate in the system. They come from the academic and scientific sectors to engage in risk and vulnerability analyses or to disseminate geographic information or the environmental protection sector, with the special participation of the Mi Río (My River) Institute, which aims to protect Medellín's rivers through better risk management.

The inhabitants of Medellín have been strongly committed to the implementation of the plan because of their exposure to natural hazards and related risks. The citizens' role has been crucial for integrating this issue into the general planning process and following through with implementation. In Medellín there are 174 Citizen Emergency Committees (called *Comités barriales*) which are composed of district leaders trained in specific emergency techniques. These Committees are carrying out specific funded by the city budget. In an emergency situation, these Committees are self-reliant and can take action immediately.

On top of this successful mobilization, further efforts to raise awareness in the population include engaging the mass media - *TeleMedellín* and *TeleAntioquia* - to promote disaster risk reduction. Local stakeholders also train leaders of emergency committees and school committees.

In 2003, the local government also set up the emergency number 123, which is linked to an operational platform gathering all State and rescue organizations. This enables them to act rapidly and efficiently in case of a disaster. Medellín was the first city in Colombia to set up such an emergency number, and its example has been followed in Bogotá and other regional capitals.

To implement disaster risk reduction activities at local level, Medellín allocates annually a dedicated amount for risk management in the municipal budget. In 2008 around US\$5 million has been dedicated to this purpose. The system also benefits from support from international financial institutions.

Impacts & results

The disaster management system of Medellín has been working efficiently for 15 years. The city's authorities have been very successful at integrated risk management into ordinary activities of environmental protection, public construction, scientific and technical research and education. Furthermore, better zonal risk management has been initiated. Families living in landslide prone areas have been relocated to safe areas and a reforestation process has been launched.

The system is successful because from the beginning, it has received strong support from local governments and the wider population despite all political changes (four different local administrations have supported the system). Disaster risk reduction activities have also been supported by high-quality technical and scientific advice.

Overall, the local initiatives to reduce disaster risks have been very successful. This is reflected in national statistics which show a very significant reduction in the number of landslides. Whereas 533 landslides occurred in the country in 1993, only 191 occurred in 1995. While this may be partly explained by natural processes, the mitigation efforts conducted at local level were a significant contribution to this achievement.

The good practice

1) Mainstreaming disaster risk reduction into development planning

The Government of Colombia has been integrating disaster risk reduction issues into all national development plans for 16 years and through 4 different administrations. A specific chapter dedicated to risk management was included in the Development Plan for 2002-2006, and in the 2006-2012 Plan. This process was mirrored in the regional and local development plans, embodying the country's process of decentralization. Risk management has become a tool integrated into the country planning process.

2) Risk reduction measures uniting divided communities

Mainstreaming disaster risk reduction in local development plans and activities adds value, as it helps overcome social problems and divisions that are not directly related to risk management. Medellín is a good example, where disaster risk reduction is implemented in districts with high incidence of socio-political violence or other problems. Even in this context, disaster risk issues are considered by the whole population to be neutral. People-centered initiatives promoted by the municipality are thus able to create a strong sense of unity within otherwise divided communities. People often gather within public forums to discuss and raise problems of common concern, overcoming, at least temporarily, social, cultural or political differences. Underprivileged citizens have been involved in retrofitting or construction, and have participated in awareness-raising through cultural events. By mainstreaming risk management issues into the planning process of Medellín, the whole population of the district has improved its way of life, contributed to reducing violence and poverty, and raised awareness.

Lessons learnt

While the disaster risk management system developed in Medellín has been successful in many ways, several challenges persist:

1. There remains a need to have an all-hazard risk transfer mechanism for all citizens.
2. There is need to set up an early warning system to prevent floods caused by the rivers.
3. At present there are still some 24,000 families living in high-risk zones. Mostly internally displaced persons from the internal conflict, they urgently need to be relocated to safer areas.

Reflecting on local authorities' engagement in general, it has to be noted that aside from the good examples of several cities, some mayors do not convene local disaster risk management committees as often as they should. This leads to sub-optimal disaster response and tragic consequences. The Colombian experience so far shows that while it is important to ensure that disaster risk reduction is a national priority through strong political commitment at highest level, it is even more important to have the same sustainable commitment at local level, where action is taken. This often remains a challenge, as administrations change and it is difficult to predict whether newly elected authorities will assume the same responsibilities and consider disaster risk management a priority – even for cities like Medellín, which has gone a long way in the field of disaster risk reduction already. The main challenge facing Medellín is thus to keep the momentum to systematically integrate risk issues into all urban development projects carried out in the city.

Overall, the experience of Colombia in decentralizing authorities for risk management and mainstreaming disaster risk management at a local level represents a good

practice because it shows that it is possible to institutionalize and mainstream risk management into development policies with very positive results, in spite of complex social problems. This process has been implemented for almost two decades in Colombia, steadily increasing the country's capacity to cope with disasters.

The Colombian case shows how a National Platform can be instrumental in providing the legal basis, strategies and policies to strengthen the responsibility and autonomy of local authorities in disaster risk management. The decentralization of a multi-stakeholder coordinating mechanism for disaster risk management has been successfully replicated not only in Colombia, but also in other countries in Latin America.

Potential for replication

Mainstreaming disaster risk reduction into national plans is an ambitious process which takes time to be efficient. However awareness is rising in the population and in government at all administrative levels.

To deal with risks in an efficient way, local authorities need three things: a wide knowledge of risks, a strong political commitment to disaster risk reduction, and support from the population. In Medellín these three elements have been developed, providing a replicable model.