



On the Record: Central American Civil Society After Mitch (1999)

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From the AP Editorial Desk

Rebuilding After Mitch – The Role of Civil Society

by Iain Guest

On October 29, 1998, Hurricane Mitch tore into Central America, leaving behind a trail of death and destruction. By conservative estimates, over 7,000 people died, and another 10,000 disappeared in Honduras alone – a country of 5.5 million. As many as 2,000 Nicaraguans died in a massive mudslide in Nicaragua. Guatemala and El Salvador were also hit, albeit to a lesser extent. It was a deadly blow, the more so because the region was recovering from decades of repression and war.

At the same time, Mitch also presented an opportunity. In the first place, it put Central America back on the international agenda. With the end of the Cold War the region had lost its strategic interest, and settled into something of a political backwater. This changed dramatically with Mitch. After a belated response, the United States promised a package of aid that was both large (\$956 million) and thoughtful. President Clinton visited the region in mid-March – only the third American president to make the trip.

Second, Mitch has revived interest in aiding the region, after a period in which aid flows have declined dramatically. Bilateral donors began to pool their efforts in the aftermath of Mitch. They formed a consultative group, and met in Washington and Geneva. The third meeting of the group will take place in Stockholm, Sweden between May 25 and 27, to review a package of measures aimed at the long-term reconstruction of the region.

Governments of the four stricken countries, together with Costa Rica, have responded vigorously at the two earlier sessions of the consultative group, loudly demanding assistance and arguing

that their debt be at least partially forgiven. But the reconstruction plans of the two key governments, Honduras and Nicaragua, had still not been unveiled by the end of April. According to Nicaraguan NGOs, Nicaragua plans to seek \$1,300 million, of which 45 percent would go to rebuilding the economic infrastructure (roads, bridges etc) and only 26 percent to social programs or what might be termed "human development." This, say the NGOs, is completely inappropriate and should be reversed to favor social programs.

For its part, Honduras was reported to be seeking sums so large that they risk getting thrown out of court by the donors. Beyond seeking debt relief, the Honduran government has given few clues as to its long-term reconstruction plans. A land reform measure that was adopted in December made it easier for foreign companies to buy up land, and was criticized by peasant associations for putting further pressure on small farmers.

In a recent move, the Honduran Congress voted to weaken the powers of the Human Rights Ombudsman after he criticized several government agencies for misusing emergency relief aid. The measure prompted an international outcry and was withdrawn, but it showed the sensitivity of the government towards criticism from civil society.

After the first expressions of concern, donors have been equally unforthcoming. The large US package of aid has been blocked by a dispute between the Clinton Administration and the US Congress, leaving it entirely possible that the US will go to Stockholm without having released any reconstruction aid during the six months since Mitch.

Neither donors nor the multilateral banks have made any serious effort to relieve the debt burden of Nicaragua or Honduras. Shortly after Mitch, the World Bank created a trust fund to help the governments repay their debt to the multilateral banks. Six months later, only \$120 million has been pledged – equivalent to less than 25 percent of Honduras' annual repayments. The Bank estimates that Honduras's economy will shrink by three percent this year, but this has not stopped the International Monetary Fund (IMF) from drawing up another structural adjustment agreement that calls for accelerated growth and greater openness to imports.

Misguided Development

In short, the sense of urgency that followed Mitch has evaporated. Even less is there a sense of new thinking – of new vision – from the governments affected or from the international community.

This is deeply worrying, for if one thing was clear about Mitch it is that misguided, even abusive, policies were mainly responsible for the disaster. This was most obvious in the way that poor migrants from the interior were channeled into crowded, crime-ridden shanty-towns that clung to the slopes of Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras. Several of these barrios were swept away during the storms. It was also apparent in the slash and burn agriculture that denuded the mountains in the interior, or in the destruction of mangroves by shrimp farmers. Such practices made the environment more vulnerable, the poverty deeper, and Mitch more damaging.

The Stockholm meeting will only succeed if the governments of the region and their donors make a clean break with the past. They must commit themselves to a fundamentally new approach to development. Above all, this has to include a role for civil society.

Civil society should be the centerpiece of any new compact between donors and recipients to emerge from Stockholm. It has been absent from the table too long in Central America. Indeed, this has been one of the principal causes of violence in the region over the past 30 years. In El Salvador, 14 powerful families used the apparatus of the state (and several paramilitary police forces) to preserve their control of land and political power. The Nicaraguan revolution was provoked by the refusal of the Somoza dynasty to permit any kind of democracy. Guatemala's bloody wars have been directed against indigenous communities and fueled by the conquistador mentality of the white rulers.

Natural disasters and political upheavals have gone hand in hand throughout these turbulent times. In one of the most dramatic examples, the Somoza government sealed its own destruction and gave birth to the revolution in Nicaragua by its corrupt response to the Managua earthquake in 1972.

Galvanized Civil Society

It would be appropriate if Mitch were to provoke another political transformation, albeit hopefully less bloody and more respectful of human rights. It may happen. Civil society made its mark during the Mitch emergency in Nicaragua and Honduras and El Salvador – proving itself indispensable and filling the gap left by inefficient government services that collapsed in the face of the challenge. There are many inspiring examples, from the brigadistas de salud (health brigades) that were dusted off in Nicaragua and helped to prevent the outbreak of disease, to the Honduran Network for Sustainable Development (SDN-HON), which kept civil society informed of the disaster by Internet throughout the crisis.

This taste of responsibility has galvanized civil society. In Nicaragua and Honduras, organizations from across the social spectrum have come together to speak with once voice. Eleven separate campaigns (representing over 500 different organizations) have united in Honduras to form Interforos. In Nicaragua, some 320 organizations have formed the coordinadora (coordinator). These two networks have sat down with their respective governments, and demanded a role in rebuilding their two nations. With help from foreign friends like Oxfam and the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) they have brought their case to Washington and initiated a dialogue with donors. They intend to be a permanent feature in their respective countries.

This would be a revolutionary development in a region famous for its revolutions. The question is whether it can be sustained at the national or international level. At the national level, many nongovernmental groups have mistaken coordination for progress and frittered away grand opportunities in endless meetings and bureaucracy. At the international level, donors pay lip service to "human rights," "transparency," and "participation," but without following through.

Even less do they help to create a context that allows civil society a real voice. Disregarding the environment, promoting exports, and putting up foreign-owned assembly plants (maquilas) - the current approach - does not encourage transparency and participation by Honduran nongovernmental players in their country's future. In fact, making loud demands for "transparency" and "participation" may even divert attention from the destructive impact of many aid policies.

The first test of the governments' commitment towards participation is likely to happen in Stockholm. The Swedish government, and Swedish NGOs, are hosting a pre-conference event for NGOs from the region. There is also some talk of a "parallel" event for civil society at Stockholm. The response of the NGOs themselves has been cool. They feel they could be shunted off to the side instead of treated as full partners. As of writing, they are still undecided about how to participate.

The Series

This series of *On the Record* takes Hurricane Mitch as the starting point for a series on civil society in Central America. It concentrates on Honduras, which suffered most and is probably least well known to an international audience, but will also take in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala. Tomorrow's issue will look at the impact of Mitch on Honduras. In the course of the next few weeks, we will also visit the Lempa river valley in El Salvador, and talk to migrants starting out on their dangerous clandestine journey north to the United States.

The series will follow the usual format. Each issue will include several different articles addressing different aspects of a theme. They will come out daily, or every other day, up to and throughout the Stockholm conference. Our intention is to provide a series of snapshots, rather than exhaustive coverage, and if we focus on one particular feature in a country this is not to say it does not apply elsewhere. Where possible, we will provide references for those interested. The entire series will run to between 11 and 15 issues.

The material on Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala was researched and written by Iain Guest, an associate member of The Advocacy Project who visited the region in March. Donna Vukelich, a writer who lives and works in Nicaragua, has contributed articles on Nicaragua. We are grateful to Midge Quandt for her interview with Sophia Montenegro, a prominent Nicaraguan activist, and to Andres Conteris, a tireless activist for community development who accompanied Iain Guest on interviews.

This series is consistent with the goals of The Advocacy Project, which was set up last year to work with civil society and human rights campaigners, to get their message out through the Internet. By looking at reconstruction in Central America through the prism of civil society, we have also been able to assess how seriously aid donors take their commitment to help participation.

We are also pleased to be working on this project with Guatemala Partners, the Washington-based group that has funded scores of community-based rights, relief, and development projects in the region. In the aftermath of Mitch, GP is providing grants to many effective local

organizations working on community development projects and advocating for rights-based reconstruction. Several are profiled in this series.

Opinion: Reconstruction – Or Construction Built on Human Rights?

by Grahame Russell

On the Need for a New Vision of Development

"For many days, a huge cloud was above us, immobile, dumping rain. Small mountain creeks turned into powerful rivers that washed down trees, rocks and mud, sweeping everything along with them ... "

That was the way that a survivor recalled his brush with El Nino in the Mexican town of Belisario Dominguez, on September 20, 1998. Hundreds of Mexicans died, and hundreds of thousands more were affected.

Following the disaster, my organization (Guatemala Partners) immediately channeled funds to Mexican NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) and CBOs (community-based organizations) to help the homeless and mountain communities that were cut off from any assistance.

Shortly afterwards, I visited the remains of Belisario Dominguez, in southwest Chiapas. In the doorway of her hut, a woman handed me lemonade which she said was "prepared with boiled water," knowing that people were contracting dengue, cholera and malaria due to the lack of potable water and clean food. She pointed at the space where her kitchen and latrine used to be. "Just over there," she continued, pointing to a boulder-strewn field, "is where my neighbors' homes were."

Most of those affected were poor even before they were hit by El Nino, and our Mexican partner groups insisted that while the rains and flooding were natural, the "disaster" was not. Over generations, the economic development model contributed to the "disaster" by encouraging Mexicans to strip the mountains of their hardwood (sold locally and internationally) and by clearing coastal lands for cattle grazing, all of which weakened local ecosystems that, in turn, resulted in greater top soil loss and mudslides. A majority of Mexicans, mired in conditions of poverty, contributed to the environmental damage, using slash and burn subsistence farming techniques.

In short, the poor were the first to suffer from a disaster that was prompted, in part, by the economic development model that exploits and damages the environment and forces so many to live in poverty.

Whatever little international attention that southwest Chiapas was receiving in the wake of El Nino all but disappeared when Hurricane Mitch hit Central America. In February 1999, with memories of Mexico still fresh in my mind, I walked through some of the teeming neighborhoods that cover Tegucigalpa, Honduras. With a partner NGO, I was visiting the huts of women who received \$100 each from a revolving loan fund financed by Guatemala Partners.

This project, including technical training, is enabling these women, who had lost what little they possessed to the ravages of Mitch, to work their way out of destitution.

Whether they can escape poverty is another matter altogether. In the aftermath of Mitch, Peter Bell of CARE USA rightly observes: "After the mud and muck finally recede, what will again be revealed is the bedrock social problem of the region, and that is extreme poverty."

This is the vicious cycle that underlies most "natural" disasters, whether it is Chiapas, Tegucigalpa, or Santo Domingo (which was struck by Hurricane Georges last year). The worst hit are always the poor. Poverty makes them vulnerable; it also triggers the disaster. Poverty elimination must be the target of reconstruction.

Transforming the Past Approach

The humanitarian response to Mitch was widespread and strong. Clothing, food, shelter, medicine, volunteers, and financial aid arrived quickly and were put, usually, to good use.

But now and over the next few weeks, leading up to the May 25 "donor's meeting" in Stockholm, the debate must focus on the underlying cause of these "natural" disasters, and why they cause so much death and destruction. The region cannot afford to reconstruct the economic development model that has, for generations, kept a majority of the region's population in vulnerable conditions of poverty.

This kind of poverty is a complex and overlapping violation of human rights – political, economic, social and civil. Of course it is not confined to Central America. As the Economist magazine put in (November 14, 1998): "Millions in some third-world countries live, year in and year out, with a horror called extreme poverty, and many die of it. Malnutrition, dirty water and lack of health care kill far more children, undramatically, off-camera, every week, than the maybe 20,000 lives swept away by Central America's latest floods and mud slides."

In the case of Central America, many factors have contributed:

Land. Dating back to the Spanish conquest, unjust land distribution has been kept in place by national oligarchies that showed little interest in investing in the basic rights and well-being of their majority co-citizens.

Export-driven economic development models. These insist on using the best lands for export. Regional government and international donors have invested little in the majority of Central Americans in a way that would permit them to develop alternative sources of employment, providing livable wages, or to use sustainably the land to produce for local need and develop local markets. Multi-national companies and local landowners use the best land for export products, usually paying workers non-livable wages. Through unsustainable land use practices and waste disposal, this has often resulted in environmental damage.

United States and Militarism. Since the 1950s, the United States supported Central American militaries, providing extensive financial aid to their regimes. Using repression against people

working for economic, social, political, and cultural rights, these regimes "militarized" the economies, setting up military banks and companies, while enriched military officers became large landowners and investors. The corollary was, of course, that these regimes invested little in the social, economic, and legal infrastructures necessary for democracy and rights-based economic development to succeed.

Structural Adjustment. Fiscal policies and development priorities, designed and imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, have also served to de-invest in people and in the essential infrastructures. Foreign debts have increased, as have poverty and environmental destruction.

A New Model, Based on Rights

The 1990s has shown the first signs of a beginning-of-the-end of the era of military and elitist regimes in Central America. Hopefully, the post-Mitch era can take this a stage further, and be a beginning-of-the-end of unjust and unsustainable economic development policies.

If they are to properly re-build Central America, the international community, governments of the region, and regional and international companies, banks and investment institutions must deal with two fundamental challenges:

Civil society and transparency. First, "civil society" (NGOs, CBOs, and their leaders) must be fully incorporated into decision-making concerning investment, business development and re-building – whether it be at the local, national, and international levels. All decision-making at the national and international levels, in the private and public sectors, must be absolutely transparent.

Rights-based investment and development policies. Second, all investments and business development and re-building projects must respect the promotion, protection, and guarantee of economic, social, and cultural, as well as political and civil rights. There can be no separation between economic and development policy on the one hand, and human rights and political considerations, on the other. The two are inseparable.

What does "rights-based development" mean in practice?

Will foreign investment (in tourism, maquiladora industries, natural resource exploitation, etc.) be designed and implemented to monopolize the best lands and beach front, and exploit cheap labor, with no respect for human rights or environmental laws? Or will it be based on transparent communication and coordination with local populations and explicit guarantees for international environmental and human rights law?

Will a road construction project serve the interests of the national and international economic elite interests? Or will it provide access to transportation and communication for previously isolated, impoverished communities?

Will health and education infrastructure investments guarantee long-term access to appropriate health services and primary and secondary education for the majority population, in their

communities and neighborhoods?

Will most loans and credit continue to favor production for export? Or will credit and loans be provided on a long-term basis to enable cooperatives and community businesses to use local labor and resources to produce for local and national consumption and sale?

Will political and legal infrastructure investments, acknowledging decades of corruption and impunity, re-build political and legal structures from the rural and neighborhood levels up, training and educating the majority populations in their political and legal rights, encouraging and enabling citizen participation?

Will all reconstruction projects and investment plans take the necessary steps, in their design and implementation, to counter-act endemic gender and racial discrimination?

Rights-based reconstruction and development means that when policies are planned by governments, inter-governmental banks and financial institutions, and private banks and companies their implementation must promote and guarantee respect for all human rights at every step of the process.

Working with On the Record

Guatemala Partners is pleased to work with The Advocacy Project on this series of "On the Record." While there was some international attention on Central America during the repression and wars of the 1980s, historical poverty and exploitation – that kill far more people than all the wars and repression combined – has received little sustained attention.

GP raises funds to support the work of NGOs and CBOs in Chiapas (Mexico) and Central America that are working on the front line to transform the roots of poverty, discrimination and impunity. The groups that you will find profiled in this series are examples of, and a testament to ingenuity and efficiency.

GP also works to spread the word about the development and human rights work being done by our partners. This means that education and advocacy are central to our work. We welcome the opportunity to get the message out through On the Record.

We also hope that NGOs and CBOs in Central America will attract more attention from international organizations. It must not be more of the same. The challenge now is to transform the economic, political, and military structures that have contributed to the cycle of poverty, (sometimes) repression, and impunity. Mitch has given us an opportunity. It must not be wasted.

Grahame Russell, a human rights lawyer, is director of Guatemala Partners. He has worked for different human rights and development NGOs in Central America, Canada and the US, and served on the UN peace-keeping mission to Guatemala. (MINUGUA).

- **Guatemala Partners** is a tax-exempt 501(c)3 organization that provides funding and technical support to development, humanitarian relief, and human rights projects in Guatemala, Chiapas (Mexico) and Honduras. It also educates in the US about

international rights, humanitarian, and development issues, and helps US communities and organizations to enter into working partnerships with communities and organizations in the south working on these issues. Guatemala Partners, 1830 Connecticut Ave., NW, Washington DC 20009; T: 202-783-1123; F: 202-483-6730.

- Funding and financial contributions. If you would like to make contributions to the work of NGOs profiled in this On the Record Series (or if you know of foundations that would consider funding these organizations), please contact our offices.
- For information about the Stockholm conference, contact Per Sundelind in Sweden.

Oxfam Launches Study on Impact of Mitch

Oxfam America has commissioned local security (including food security) experts from Central America, to review the impact of Mitch and propose priorities for reconstruction. The reports will be launched on Thursday, May 20, at InterAction, 1717 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Suite 701, Washington, DC 20036.

The roundtable will last from 9 am to 1 pm, and will feature Alberto Enriquez (FUNDE, El Salvador); Edgar Pape (FLASCO, Guatemala); Gilberto Rios (NITPLAN, Nicaragua); Solon Barraclough (UNRISD, Geneva); and Daniel Moss (MIT, Cambridge)

- Contact Robyn Smith: T: 202-393-3544; F: 202-783-8739

US Congress to Discuss Multibillion Dollar Aid Package for Kosovo and Mitch

A committee of the US Senate and House will start, on Tuesday (May 11), to discuss an emergency relief spending bill that will provide almost \$1 billion for the countries affected by Mitch, and several millions more for Kosovar refugees. On the Record will keep you informed. Also contact **Caroline Richard** at the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA).

In the next issue: Honduras in the Eye of the Storm