

NETWORK HPN paper

NGO Responses to Hurricane Mitch: Evaluations for Accountability and Learning

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ABSTRACT

In October 1998, Hurricane Mitch caused the first regional disaster in Central American history. Winds, flooding and landslides killed 9,000 people, and seriously injured 13,000 more. The storm destroyed or badly damaged almost 80,000 homes, leaving 300,000 people homeless. Thousands of Central Americans required rescue and emergency medical care, and millions needed humanitarian relief aid.

This Network Paper combines insights about NGO responses to Hurricane Mitch from three major sources:

- *Huit mois après Mitch: Bilan des actions et premières leçons*, an evaluation of the French NGO response carried out by the Groupe Urgence-Réhabilitation-Développement (Groupe URD).
- An evaluation of the British NGO response, commissioned by the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) and conducted by a team of consultants brought together by Espacios Consultores Asociados S.A. of Costa Rica.
- A 'companion study' to the DEC evaluation, *Scaling-up After Hurricane Mitch: A Lesson-Learning Study for the Disasters Emergency Committee*, by Sarah Lister.

This paper does not compare the performance of French and British NGOs, nor was this an aim of the respective evaluations, which were separately designed and implemented. If anything, the impression conveyed by both evaluations is that French and British NGOs face the same challenges, and are grappling with many of the same issues.

This paper also makes no comment on the comparative quality of these evaluations, or on the relative position of evaluations as a whole in the French and the British aid worlds.

What this paper does offer is:

- a synthesis of key attention and learning points from the response to Hurricane Mitch. Most are, in general terms, transferable to other crisis responses;
- an example of inter-agency NGO evaluations, and their potential value for organisational learning;
- an example of the sorts of questions that evaluations pose, and ideas for designing evaluations; and
- an analysis of the role of inter-agency platforms in public appeals and fund management.

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Layout and production: Rebecca Lovelace, HPN

Printing: DS Print & ReDesign, Enfield, London

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Invitation to Readers

We welcome your comments on this paper, as well as information on non-governmental fundraising mechanisms elsewhere. A copy of your comments will be sent to the authors. Comments received may be used in future HPN publications.

ISBN: 0-85003-504 X

Price per copy: £5.00 (excluding postage and packing).

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Glossary

CCD	Commission Coopération-Développement (Commission for Cooperation and Development)
CIRAD	Centre International de Recherche pour l'Agriculture et le Développement (International Centre for Agricultural and Developmental Research)
CRATerre	Centre de Recherche et d'Application-Terre (Centre for Land Research and Application)
ECA	Espacios Consultores Asociados, S.A.
FDF	Fondation de France (France Foundation)
FFW	Food for Work
GRET	Groupe de Recherche et d'Échanges Technologiques (Research and Technological Exchange Group)
Groupe URD	Groupe Urgence Réhabilitation-Développement (Group Emergencies, Rehabilitation, Development)
INAP-G	Institut National Agronomique Paris-Grignon (National Agronomic Institute, Paris-Grignon)
MAE	Ministère des Affaires Etrangères (Ministry of Foreign Affairs)
MILONG	Mission de Liaison avec les ONG (NGO Liaison Mission)
MSF	Médecins sans Frontières
PAHO	Pan American Health Organization
TOR	term of reference
VOICE	Voluntary Organizations in Co-operation in Emergency
WFP	World Food Programme

Spanish terms

<i>apante</i>	late-season cultivation
<i>asentamiento</i>	human settlement
<i>barrio</i>	neighbourhood
<i>brigadista</i>	volunteer work group
<i>damnificado</i>	victim
<i>guaro</i>	alcohol
<i>manzana</i>	plot of land of about 7,000 square meters
<i>postera</i>	second harvest
<i>primera</i>	first harvest
<i>sumidero</i>	drainage system for a common washing area

Executive Summary

For Central America, Hurricane Mitch was a disaster of appalling magnitude. Nine thousand people lost their lives, 300,000 more lost their homes as flood water swept them away. Direct damage to Central America's already-fragile infrastructure and productive capacity came to billions of dollars. This paper presents the key findings of three evaluations of the NGO response to Hurricane Mitch, sets out the main lessons to be learnt from them, and offers insights into how evaluations should be designed and implemented. Some of these insights are specific to their context, but many others are generally applicable.

Learning from Mitch

The emergency responses to Mitch were strong in some areas, and weak in others. The British evaluation identified water projects, for instance, as generally successful, and noted that agencies did good work in targeting especially vulnerable groups, such as women and marginalised communities. But the evaluations assessed here also concluded that improvements were required in a number of areas.

The first is housing reconstruction. While some projects were notably successful, others used inappropriate materials, followed designs which exacerbated, rather than alleviated, social and family stress and built new settlements far from sources of income. Timeframes were too short for what is a long-term process, and many agencies failed to appreciate the complex legal, social, economic and cultural aspects of housing.

Rehabilitation of the health sector is the second area requiring attention. Again, the picture is mixed. Collective efforts succeeded in controlling the spread of diseases in Mitch's immediate aftermath, but sometimes inappropriate drugs and medical supplies were distributed. More fundamentally, agencies

generally did not see beyond epidemic control and immediate therapeutic aims; what is needed is not only first aid, but also a more proactive approach to deep-seated structural, funding and management problems in the wider health sector.

Food security and agricultural rehabilitation is the third area investigated by these evaluations. Again, the message is the same: agencies need to look beyond the short-term distribution of food aid, and develop a better understanding of how local systems of food production and commerce work if they are to effectively rehabilitate damaged industries.

Beyond these sectoral issues, the evaluations looked at here addressed a number of cross-cutting themes that go to the heart of agency action in the aftermath of a disaster like Mitch. Decades of experience notwithstanding, agencies still find it difficult to assess beneficiary needs adequately, and do not take sufficient note of local capacities and resources. Local participation in needs assessment, as well as in specific projects, must be strengthened if agencies are to provide aid that meets the needs of beneficiaries. Similarly, agencies should listen more carefully to the people they are trying to help when designing programmes: locating housing projects miles from their inhabitants' main sources of income, for example, cannot help in rebuilding livelihoods. Coordination among agencies, and between agencies and local organisations, also remains a problem; arguments that the need for speed precludes coordination are valid, but institutional self-interest also comes into play, and needs to be acknowledged. Both evaluations also highlight the need for donor flexibility, both in terms of end-uses, and in terms of spending timetables. Throughout the response to Mitch, tight spending deadlines led to poor planning and purchasing decisions.

In the short term, responding to a disaster such as Mitch is of necessity a grass-roots action; people in need require rapid help on the ground. But an emergency like Mitch does not occur in a social, economic or political vacuum, and persistent vulnerability is a fact of life for many of the people assisted in its wake. Disasters exacerbate a country's inequities, but they rarely create them. Although these inequities may be beyond agencies' direct control, this does not make advocating change any less important.

Although political scaling-up is crucial to agencies working on issues of vulnerability in Central America, it was not a focus of the 'companion study' to the DEC evaluation analysed in this paper, which was concerned with quantitative, functional and organisational scaling-up. The study found a series of obstacles to effective scaling-up to do with the lack of good-quality information, difficult access to affected areas, poor coordination between governmental and non-governmental organisations and a dearth of suitably-qualified personnel.

One of the key dilemmas facing agencies was whether they should go operational themselves, or work through local partners. Those opting for the former tended to have stronger technical capacity, while working through counterparts generally allowed for better dialogue with target populations. Another dilemma facing agencies in their scaling-up was whether to suspend existing development programmes to concentrate on emergency relief. This apparent tension reflects the unhelpful institutional divide between emergency and development aid in the international aid system. It needs rethinking if development aid is to address structural vulnerability.

Designing evaluations

There are also lessons to be learned about designing and implementing evaluations themselves. This paper highlights three aspects: scale, timing and topic.

Both the French and the British evaluations looked at here covered a range of agencies, rather than just one, and looked at several countries. This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the range of agency responses and practices in the wake of Mitch. But it also presented significant challenges, not least in terms of logistics and planning. Joint planning sessions before an evaluation begins are crucial if the exercise is to succeed.

Timing is also vital, both in terms of when evaluations are conducted, and how long they are allowed to take. Evaluators began their task up to a year after Hurricane Mitch struck, meaning that memories of the immediate emergency phase were hazy, judgements about the effectiveness of the various interventions became more subjective and the lessons learned came too late to redirect programmes. On the other hand, there is a need to allow enough time in the field to gather meaningful insights.

The third element assessed here is to do with the questions that evaluations should be asking. 'Typical' evaluations tend to focus on sectors of work, such as housing reconstruction or health rehabilitation, and ask whether activities in these areas were appropriate, timely and of adequate quality. Assessing actions against these specific areas is a necessary part of any agency's appraisal, but by itself will not give a complete picture of the nature or extent of an agency's impact in an affected area. Here, issues concerning organisational capacity, the perceptions of beneficiaries or gender matters are also important, as is a wider understanding of an agency's work in relation to that of other organisations.

Vulnerabilities in Central America and Hurricane Mitch

Hurricane Mitch emerged as a tropical depression off the east coast of Costa Rica on 21 October 1998. Over the next few days, its low-pressure system drew moisture-laden feeder bands from the Pacific towards west Honduras, northern Nicaragua and most of El Salvador. Winds topped 285km per hour, and many areas surrounding the Gulf of Fonseca received more rain in three days than they usually do in a year. On 28 October, Mitch swung towards central Honduras, before hitting western and north-western Nicaragua with the 'rains of the century'.

By 31 October, Mitch had begun to wane as it moved northwards, but still produced unusually high rainfall, flash floods and tidal surges in coastal El Salvador. By the time its centre reached Guatemala, the hurricane had lost much of its destructive force. Heavy rain still damaged infrastructure, but evacuations generally saved many lives, with the exception of poor neighbourhoods on steep slopes in marginal areas of Guatemala City, where most deaths occurred.



Flooding in Honduras

Pre-existing vulnerabilities

To understand both the context of Hurricane Mitch and the response to the humanitarian crisis it provoked, it is important to consider pre-existing vulnerabilities in Central America. The Central American isthmus has historically been shaped by disasters. It is one of the world's most geo-dynamic regions, marked by recurrent seismic and volcanic activity, as well as hurricanes, forest fires and drought. These high levels of risk have fostered a wide variety of natural and cultural responses. Many authors attribute the region's extraordinary bio-diversity to its intrinsic risk. Similarly, many societies in the region have developed coping mechanisms and mitigation measures to reduce risk and minimise the impact of disasters (for example, housing on stilts in many Caribbean settlements).

Many of these traditional coping mechanisms have been modified over the past decades as a result of rapid population growth, coupled with highly skewed access to resources and land. The concentration of land in the hands of wealthy elites was a major contributing cause to much of the civil strife which has afflicted many regions of Central America over the past half century. Indigenous peoples, such as the Miskito in Honduras and Nicaragua and the Quiché and Mam in Guatemala, bore the brunt of these wars. By the end of the 1980s, civil war had profoundly changed the spatial distribution of populations through internal displacement, out-migration and the swelling of urban shantytowns. For example, over 64 per cent of Nicaraguans live in cities today, whereas a generation ago the country was a predominantly rural society.

These processes contributed to much-increased vulnerability. Most national governments emerged from the 1980s with far greater external debts to service, and all adopted stringent structural-adjustment policies during the 1990s. Already-limited public expenditure on social programmes was further curtailed to satisfy the conditions of international lending institutions and others. As a result, high levels of ill-health, exclusion and poverty among both the rural and urban poor have increased vulnerability. Uncontrolled urban sprawl and speculative land markets have pushed many marginal settlements into high-risk areas, such as river canyons and flood-prone coastal zones. The expansion of the agricultural frontier into more fragile ecosystems – eliminating stabilising forest cover from steeper and unstable terrain – has increased the frequency of flash floods, mudflows and landslides. The peace processes in El Salvador and Guatemala have also led to the resettlement of displaced, repatriated and other highly-vulnerable populations in several rural areas, many of them in high-risk flood-prone zones such as the Lower Lempa Valley in El Salvador, and Suchitepéquez and Retalhuleu in Guatemala.

The impact of a single disaster like Mitch cannot be properly understood without also accounting for the cumulative effects of many cyclical hazards. The *El Niño* phenomenon of 1997–98 produced months of drought in parts of central Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador and northern Nicaragua. Between May and December 1997, massive forest fires destroyed

over 1.5m hectares of forest throughout the region (an area amounting to three-quarters the size of El Salvador).

These natural, historical, economic and sociological factors contributed to conditions of social and environmental vulnerability prior to October 1998. The degree to which the impact of Hurricane Mitch was heightened by these conditions was difficult to assess by the evaluations examined in this paper. Nonetheless, these conditions had a direct impact on the coping strategies adopted by the communities which received humanitarian aid, and on the overall impact of that aid.

Mitch's aftermath: impact and damage assessment¹

Mitch's first effects were the result of severe geomorphic actions, such as sheet erosion, flash floods, landform collapses, landslides and mudslides. Satellite imagery from the US Geological Service indicated that Mitch caused over a million landslides in the disaster's first days. Rivers choked with mud and debris raged down the streets of towns and cities. Floods destroyed thousands of homes, damaged or obliterated hundreds of bridges and aqueducts and wiped out power and telecommunications systems and main highways (see Table 1). The hurricane directly affected one in ten Central Americans, the majority of them the very poorest who had built on marginal lands – steep inclines, river canyons and watersheds. Mitch's impact was worst in coastal flood plains and near river courses.

Box 1: The impact of Hurricane Mitch in different geographical areas

The Pacific plain zone

The rivers in this coastal strip burst their banks and rushed through at high speed, their waters laden with stones and sand. This meant that they not only increased in width, but also changed their course, extensively affecting irrigation systems in large plantations. After the waters had swept through, stones and alluvium were left strewn over a wide area, making it unsuitable for cultivation until the debris and silt were removed.

The mountains and hills of the interior

In this zone, damage was much more localised: plots of land in areas liable to flooding here, a few strips of riverbank there, a patch of forest or coffee trees further on. River courses were altered, and the transport infrastructure was severely affected, thus hampering both the distribution of food aid and the transport of crops (especially cash crops, the main source of income for small farmers). Some crops, for example beans, were badly damaged by excessive humidity. On the other hand, in some regions heavy rainfall benefited the corn crop, and led to increased production levels.

The plain extending from the eastern foothills to the Atlantic Ocean

This area was especially affected by the surge of flood water rushing down from high central areas. The level of the Coco River and of all the rivers flowing from east to west rose, and they all burst their banks. This is not unusual, and the native Indian populations living in the area have houses on piles, lifestyles adapted to the water cycles and a diet and economy based on fishing products. Furthermore, the years of political problems and occasional confrontations have made the people living in these regions very resilient. For them, the difficulties they faced in the wake of Mitch were nothing new.

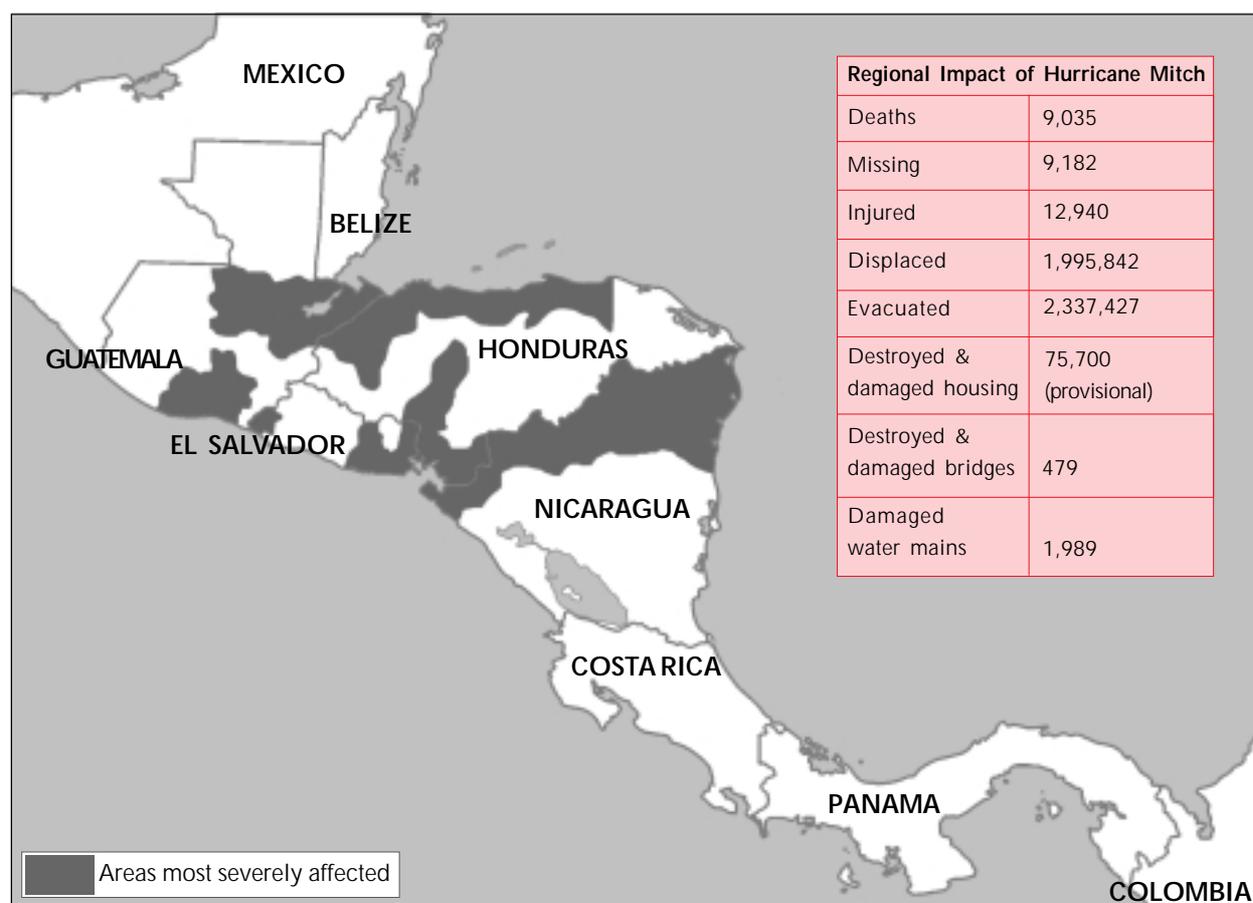


Table 1: The humanitarian impact of Hurricane Mitch by country

	Honduras	Nicaragua	Guatemala	El Salvador	Costa Rica	Panama	Belize	Total
Deaths	5,657	2,863	268	240	5	2	–	9,035
Missing	8,058	970	121	29	4	–	–	9,182
Injured	12,272	388	280	–	–	–	–	12,940
Displaced	1,482,659	368,261	105,055	28,452	3,007	8,408	–	1,995,842
Evacuated	2,100,721	–	106,604	49,000	5,500	602	75,000	2,337,427
Destroyed & damaged housing	n/a	41,430	21,000	10,372	965	1,933	–	75,700 (provisional figure)
Destroyed & damaged bridges	215	63	121	10	69	1	–	479
Damaged water mains	1,683	79	60	155	12	–	–	1,989

Source: Comisión Económica para América Latina (CEPAL)

In the weeks following Mitch, thousands of people required rescue and emergency medical care, and millions needed humanitarian relief aid, in the form of water, food, shelter and clothing. Winds, flooding and landslides killed 9,000 people (another 9,000 went missing) and seriously injured 13,000 more. Almost 80,000 houses were destroyed or seriously damaged, leaving up to 300,000 people homeless. Two million others had to abandon their homes and belongings. Some 2,000 potable water systems were destroyed, leaving most of the population of Honduras and Nicaragua without dependable drinking water. Mitch also destroyed or severely damaged sewage and drainage systems and latrines, and its floods and landslides left lakes of dirty water standing throughout Central America. For example, in the Honduran capital Tegucigalpa, damage to sewer systems caused by the Cerro del Berrinche landslide created a septic lake more than two kilometres long in the centre of the city. Floods also spread animal and human cadavers, fecal matter and refuse across urban and rural areas, attracting plagues of rats.

Crowded and insanitary conditions for refugees and a lack of clean water and food contributed to the spread of diseases in the weeks after the storm. Cases of acute respiratory infections (ARIs) and diarrhoea rose dramatically, and the pre-existing incidence of cholera was somewhat exacerbated. Leptospirosis (spread by rodent urine), which had been virtually non-existent in the previous year, reappeared. There was no significant increase in malaria and other mosquito-borne diseases like dengue fever, but the high risk of these, and health problems such as skin infections and conjunctivitis, called for preventive measures. These included mosquito nets and insecticides; water-purification tablets and chlorine; rat extermination; the cleaning of roads and houses; and clean water and sanitation supplies. Serious damage to 30 per cent of Central America's hospitals,

health units and other social-service units made responding to these secondary effects difficult.

Other effects requiring counteraction included the storm's psycho-traumatic impact on survivors, and the possibility of famine. Mitch hit subsistence-crop production hard, especially as maize and bean stocks were already low in the region due to *El Niño*. Mitch also inflicted substantial damage on livestock production by small and medium-scale producers, and destroyed countless kitchen gardens and orchards.

Hurricane Mitch destroyed the livelihoods of thousands. Farmers saw their crops devastated, livestock lost or drowned, and their land stripped of soil or covered in deep layers of mud and silt. Artisans and owners of small businesses watched floodwaters sweep away their tools, workshops and market stands. The storm caused US\$4bn-worth of direct damage to Central America's productive sector (agriculture, forestry, fisheries, industry and commerce). Two-thirds of Honduras and Nicaragua's precarious infrastructure was destroyed; \$1.2bn of damage was done to physical infrastructure in Central America as a whole, including \$800m-worth of damage to housing and the health and education infrastructure. Raw materials and plantation production worth \$3bn were lost.

Damage to the productive capacity of these already debt-ridden, impoverished nations caused secondary crises of unemployment, labour migration, and worsened levels of social services, public health and poverty. These problems in turn further degraded productive capacity. Assistance was needed to rebuild or repair housing, make micro-loans to small businesses, replace tools and rehabilitate hospitals, clinics and other areas of the social and productive sectors. Aggravating factors such as foreign debt also needed – and still need – addressing.

2

Mobilising Aid: France and Britain

France

Centralising a public appeal

The Fondation de France (FDF), a private foundation with long experience of international solidarity work, became the focal point for public fundraising in France, and for the disbursement of funds. With the help of the main French television stations, FF28.6m (approximately £2.86m or \$4.29m) was raised in six weeks. Through the FDF, some FF25,500,000 was disbursed between 20 November 1998 and late September 1999 to around 40 French NGOs for 45 programmes. This fundraising role was a new one for the FDF.

The Task Force

Shortly after the hurricane struck, the first informal meetings were held in Paris of the Groupe de Travail Urgence-Développement (Emergency-Development Working Group), set up by the Commission Coopération-Développement (the Commission for Cooperation and Development, CCD), an umbrella group of NGOs, local authorities and government bodies. The Post-Mitch Task Force was born under the triple influence of the authorities, in particular the Mission de Liaison avec les ONGs (NGO Liaison Mission, MILONG) at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the FDF and the non-governmental associations engaged with the issue.² The Task Force was co-chaired by MILONG and the Groupe Urgence-Réhabilitation-Développement (Groupe URD), a platform and a network bringing together French NGOs, academics, researchers and trainers.³ It was funded mainly by the FDF.

The Task Force played a very active role. Monthly plenary meetings were held in Paris, bringing together over 40 NGOs, representatives of the central authorities, French local government, international

funding bodies and, sometimes, the embassies of the countries affected by Mitch. The fundamental challenges soon became apparent, among them the 'emergency/post-emergency' debate, the issue of land rights and the question of debt relief.

During its 18-month existence, the Task Force secretariat disseminated information to all the actors involved. At first, NGOs themselves were responsible for passing on information to their teams on the ground, but it soon became clear that there were gaps in this transmission system. Using the internet (e-mail plus a special Mitch page posted on the Handicap International website), as much information as possible was made available online.

Through the Task Force, a good level of coordination was achieved in France. The Task Force also ensured a presence in international fora, especially in Brussels in the context of the Voluntary Organizations in Co-operation in Emergency (VOICE), and a heavy involvement in the preparation of the Stockholm Conference of May 1999, at which French NGOs put forward their proposals for reconstruction in Central America. Many of their ideas were taken up by the French government in its official statement. In this way, French civil society established itself as a useful and important source of ideas, and demonstrated its ability to plan strategy and influence government thinking.

Britain

Centralising a public appeal

The key fund-raising mechanism in the UK was the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC). The DEC is an umbrella organisation which launches and coordinates national appeals in the UK, bringing together aid, corporate, public and

broadcasting services. By acting collectively, it saves advertising resources, avoids costly competition between agencies and ensures a consensual distribution of funds to those of its 15 member agencies best placed to bring effective and timely relief. This core mandate for public fundraising makes the DEC similar to, for example, the Swiss Chaîne du Bonheur.

The Disasters Emergency Committee

The DEC is governed and regulated by representatives of its member agencies, overseen by an independent 'council'. It also has a small, full-time secretariat. Member agencies choose whether or not to participate in a particular appeal, in the knowledge that they will be subject to external evaluation of the funds received. Minimum paperwork is required in the acute emergency phase, with agencies only having to submit 48-hour and four-week plans of action, and then a seventh-month declaration of expenditure.

Funds in all DEC appeals are distributed to participating agencies according to pre-established 'indicators of capacity', which are based on their total expenditure in overseas aid from UK-sourced funds. This mechanism allows agencies to release their own monies quickly in an emergency, confident that they will receive a certain percentage of DEC appeal funds to replenish their resources. This requires high levels of trust in the DEC system, and in the DEC's own capacity for efficient administration. Funds which are unspent six months after the launch of an appeal must be returned to the 'pool' for allocation to agencies through a bidding process.

The DEC Central America Hurricane Appeal was launched on 12 November 1998. It raised £11.2m (approximately FF112m or \$16.8m), at the time the largest amount ever raised by a DEC appeal. Funds were distributed among the 11 member agencies which chose to 'opt in' to the Mitch appeal, with the first tranche disbursed to agencies on 10 December 1998. However, agencies could start spending money before then in the knowledge that a proportion of the appeal total would be allocated to them.

Designing and implementing an evaluation

The French evaluation

With the return of Groupe URD staff from the field in November 1998, it emerged that the questions being raised by some of the teams in Nicaragua and Honduras corresponded with issues that the group had been working on for some time. These included the transition from emergency relief to rehabilitation and development, especially how to move from donation-based practices to more sustainable approaches; how international and national actors can and do work together; and the relationship between state and private humanitarian assistance.

One of the ideas therefore put forward by Groupe URD was an evaluation of the humanitarian response to Mitch to be undertaken in the field, followed by several stages of feedback and debate (see Boxes 2 and 3).

The key themes examined in the course of the field work – namely the reconstruction of living spaces ('habitat'), the question of ownership and access to land, food security, partnerships and the health sector – were determined by feedback from people working in Central America. The evaluation looked at several key sectors (housing, health and food security), and at cross-cutting themes (emergency/development, partnerships, coordination, organisational learning) also researched by Groupe URD in other contexts elsewhere in the world. Particular emphasis was placed on land rights, and on the relationship between the macro and micro levels of international aid in the region.

The evaluation team consisted of an agronomist, a doctor, a lawyer, two specialists in assistance and emergency aid, and a photographer. The evaluation took a month, and focused on Nicaragua and Honduras. There were two parts to the visit. The first consisted of a two-week tour of the area in question in order to get a feel for the impact of the crisis in different zones and for the range of humanitarian responses, as well as to establish contacts and identify issues to explore. This was used as the basis for the more in-depth work done in the second half of the visit. On returning to France, Groupe URD and the Task Force organised several stages of feedback.

Box 2: The French evaluation: stages of work

Preparation of mission and creation of network of partners	Winter 1998–99
Coordination and discussion of main issues	Spring 1999
Field visit	Summer 1999
Writing of draft report and receipt of first comments	Autumn 1999
Feedback session, technical workshops	Spring 2000
Dissemination of final report	Summer 2000
Setting up database	Autumn/Winter 2000

Box 3: The French evaluation: stages of feedback**In the field**

- At the end of each country visit, a meeting was held with NGOs to report back on first impressions and to get a debate going.
- In Nicaragua, three workshops were organised with local coordinating groups in order to report back on the results of the work, and to get their reactions (workshop 1: the link between emergency and development; workshop 2: natural disasters and food security; workshop 3: health and vulnerability).

On returning to France

- An immediate meeting was held with the French ambassadors from the area and all the relevant staff at the Foreign Ministry in order to show them how useful such joint NGO evaluation work can be.
- A meeting of the whole of the Task Force was held a few days after the team's return, to provide initial general feedback.
- The first draft of the report was then distributed for comment in France and in the field. An amended version was then circulated.
- A series of thematic workshops was then held, with the support of the FDF, in order to draw as many lessons as possible from the 'post-Mitch' exercise.

The British evaluation

Following an extensive review and reform process in 1995–96, the new DEC rules require an independent evaluation of the expenditure of appeal funds in the eighth month after the launch of an appeal.⁴ This report must be made public 12 months after launch. This is important in ensuring transparency and accountability to fundraising partners and the British public, and also facilitates individual and collective learning on good practice in response to humanitarian emergencies.

In the case of the Mitch appeal, terms of reference (TORs) for the evaluation were formulated with the help of member agencies. Questions for investigation included:

- *Geographical coverage.* What was the duration, breadth and depth of the presence of member and local partner agencies in affected countries? How appropriate was the geographical coverage of relief and rehabilitation projects supported by DEC funds, in the light of activities undertaken by other actors?
- *Identifying needs and beneficiaries.* How appropriate were the processes and criteria used to identify and meet beneficiary needs? Was there evidence throughout of vulnerability analysis?
- *Beneficiary participation.* What was the level of beneficiary involvement in the design, implementation and monitoring of projects? How effective and appropriate were these processes in ensuring the relevance and timely delivery of projects?
- *Effects on existing coping mechanisms.* How did the actions of agencies strengthen or weaken existing coping mechanisms?
- *Impact.* How effective were the interventions in bringing humanitarian relief? How appropriate was their duration and what, if any, is the likely longer-term socio-economic impact?

- *Lives and livelihoods saved.* What was the likely overall effect of the sample projects supported by DEC funds in terms of lives and livelihoods saved?
- *Comparison with other interventions.* What was the added value to the overall humanitarian response? Did DEC funds facilitate a quick response?

The contract for the Mitch evaluation was originally put out to tender in May 1999, but the lack of suitable bids meant that it had to be put to tender a second time in July. It was awarded in September to Espacios Consultores Asociados, S.A. (ECA), a group of consultants based in Costa Rica. The ECA, which has a strong base in the region, provided 12 consultants, including many Latin American nationals and Central American residents. They had a variety of professional backgrounds, among them medicine, civil and water engineering, psychology and disaster management.

The DEC also commissioned the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) to undertake a 'companion' study on questions of 'scaling up', which had been identified by member agencies as an area of particular concern.

Whereas the French fieldwork took place in summer 1999, both British studies began in October, with interviews of UK-based agency staff. In November and December, small country teams of ECA evaluators carried out fieldwork in Central America. The DEC evaluators covered Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Honduras, and the French evaluators concentrated on the latter two countries. The DEC evaluation was 'rolled out' over the region, starting in Honduras, allowing consultants with particular specialities to work in several countries, and take responsibility for a specific sectoral focus. The teams gathered in Costa Rica at the end of the evaluation to share their findings.

ECA consultants selected which projects to visit on the basis of the following factors:

- the impact of the hurricane (prioritising the worst-affected areas);
- the distribution of DEC funds (projects in areas where more DEC funds were used);
- representation in terms of the apparent performance of projects, the aim being to include at least one of the more successful projects and one of the more problematic ones;
- representation of projects per sector of intervention; and
- feasibility in terms of access.

Data were gathered using a variety of techniques and tools:

a) Interviews

Topic guides were used in interviews with key DEC agency personnel, both in the UK and in Central America, and with local partner organisations. The guides were designed to focus on the questions in the TORs.

b) Beneficiary Participatory Evaluation workshops

ECA consultants conducted 30 Beneficiary Participatory Evaluation (BPE) workshops, each with a facilitator and an assistant of different gender (except in Guatemala). The workshops were conducted in local languages. Through discussions and a voting technique using stickers of different colours to measure gender differences in beneficiary opinions, evaluators appraised how the assistance provided through DEC funding was perceived. In order to avoid hindering candid expressions of opinions, representatives of the local partner organisations that assisted the ECA consultants in identifying and contacting the beneficiary communities did not attend the BPEs. On the few occasions when it was not possible to organise BPE workshops with community members in general, community leaders and members of local councils participated.

The principal aim in selecting the members of the BPE workshops was to ensure that the maximum number of different beneficiaries participated. Although an indicative number of 25 people was given, the workshops were open to all men and women in the visited communities. In several cases, the workshops turned into a kind of general assembly.

c) Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats workshops

ECA consultants also conducted Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) workshops in each country to promote the cross-

fertilisation of ideas among those involved with the sampled projects. Consultants asked beneficiaries at BPE workshops to select participants from among themselves. Each project sample had a quota of two people, with the strict condition that at least one was a woman. Although the evaluators would not accept two men as representatives, two women were welcome to attend. Agencies and local partners provided one representative each.

In the workshops, participants were initially separated into three groups: one comprising DEC member agencies; another the local partner organisations; and the third the beneficiaries. Each group discussed their experiences with DEC-funded projects in relation to the evaluation questions, and made recommendations for further action based on these discussions. All three groups shared and discussed their main findings in plenary session. An overall discussion session wrapped up each workshop.

d) Participatory observation and flexible interviews

Every ECA consultant took field notes and spoke to many people in informal meetings in order to cross-check information and to broaden background information. Daily discussions among ECA consultants helped the exchange of data. The different professional and cultural backgrounds of the evaluators significantly enriched this exercise.

e) Financial reviews

The ECA evaluation team also reviewed agencies' financial reports, but the type and format of the available information made it impossible to analyse how cost-effective the DEC-funded projects were. Several assumptions had to be made concerning the objectives and measurable results of expenditure, particularly in terms of numbers of beneficiaries and the allocation of funds. It was not possible to draw meaningful conclusions about cost-effectiveness, or to make useful cross-agency comparisons.

Draft reports for both studies were submitted in December. Agencies provided written comments, and there were two feedback sessions in the UK in December and January. The reports were finalised shortly afterwards.

The total cost of both DEC studies, including translation, was £114,000 (about FF1,140,000 or \$171,000, very close to the DEC guideline figure of 1 per cent of the appeal total). The cost of the French evaluation came to FF305,000 (approximately £30,500 or \$45,750). This included FF50,000 for a photo documentary, which was subsequently widely exhibited. The cost of the evaluation represented 1.2 per cent of the total amount of money managed by the FDE.

The Disaster Response: Main Findings of the French Evaluation

Housing and living environment ('habitat')

The French review revealed a wide range of approaches among French NGO-sponsored projects to reconstructing living spaces. These differences related to the management of the land-rights issue; building materials; costs; interior and exterior designs of houses; housing allocation; and property rights. While this might not have been a problem in itself, difficulties arose for two reasons. First, there was no real relationship between the choices made, the contexts in question and the specific constraints related to them. Second, in any one place there could be such a huge disparity in working methods and in the type of housing allocated that there was a risk of causing social problems.

Pressure from funders about when projects were to end accelerated the implementation of programmes. However, reconstructing living environments is a complex and necessarily slow process. Building or rebuilding housing and living spaces differs from many other sectoral activities, and from the provision of temporary shelter for emergency relief. More thought has to be given to what would constitute appropriate timescales, and appropriate approaches to designing and implementing such programmes, rather than copying practices from other types of programme or project.

Box 4: Housing: finding a common approach

The project to build 142 houses in Nuevo Barrio, in the municipality of Esteli in north Nicaragua, shows that it is possible to avoid the most obvious contradictions through close collaboration between aid agencies and the municipality. A joint commission was created, involving the municipality and local and international aid agencies, which ensured a common approach towards the criteria for identifying beneficiaries, housing designs and building materials.

The programme approaches, and the resulting designs and choices of technology, ranged from genuine participatory work – generally by actors with an established presence and in-depth knowledge of Central American societies – to 'top-down' approaches. On the one hand, adobe houses with wooden frames, tiled roofs, an outside kitchen on the side sheltered from the wind and a large surrounding garden; on the other, breeze-block houses with glass windows and electricity (not yet connected to the grid), inside kitchens and little space between the houses. Costs ranged from \$400 to \$4,800. Sometimes different types of housing were built at the same site, using a variety of different methods.

Questionable technological choices

Questionable technological choices were made. Breeze-blocks appear to have been the most frequently-chosen material because of their practical advantages. They could, for example, be ordered in bulk from small urban businesses; their on-site erection was simple; and they could be used shortly after being removed from the mould, even in relatively humid weather. But the additional costs were considerable. Furthermore, the importance of the reconstruction programmes forced up the price of cement. This had a significant impact on people who, though made vulnerable by the crisis, did not qualify for reconstruction support because they did not want to move into *asentamientos* (human settlements), and thereby lose access to their economic activities.

Few of those involved in reconstruction used adobe. Fewer still tried to use recognised improved options: mass-produced adobe bricks made with hand- or even motor-operated hydraulic presses on larger sites, or adobe stabilised by adding cement after mixing. Sadly, research work on appropriate technology by organisations such as the Centre de

Recherche et d'Application-Terre (Centre for Land Research and Application, CRATerre) and the Groupe de Recherche et d'Échanges Technologiques (Research and Technological Exchange Group, GRET) was ignored.

Confused thinking

Not enough thought was given to the differences between, for example, shelter and living space. Those responsible for emergency reconstruction programmes confused several different concepts: refugee camps; temporary housing; recreating the type of living environment the people concerned wanted; and creating new urban settlements from scratch. Most of the projects visited exhibited the type of overcrowding and lack of privacy found in refugee camps, when the idea had been to create sustainable mini-towns. Difficulties were particularly evident when resettling rural populations, for whom having a garden around the house is an essential element of daily life, and one vital to their economic and food security. The small plots of land available around the new houses, sometimes on laterite or clay soil and in densely-populated areas, are no replacement for the type of gardens found around scattered homes.

Having to live in such *asentamientos* only added to the significant trauma suffered by certain population groups at the time of Hurricane Mitch. Moving from

a rural or semi-urban life to these new sites is likely to create numerous social problems, among them alcohol and drug abuse, prostitution and violence. A human settlement is not just the sum of its houses, but a space that needs to be organised for individual, family, social and collective life. This was generally forgotten. When designing such sites, especially larger ones, social amenities should be provided, such as sports grounds, schools, community facilities, facilities for women and libraries.

Interior designs

There were also problems with interior designs. In Central American societies, especially their poorer sections, domestic violence is common. One of the ways of managing such problems is to design homes with interior divisions, thereby creating spaces for intimacy and separation. Building one-roomed houses, as in one case, is therefore not optimal. In another project, the problem involved the positioning of doors. According to the architect, the decision was taken for purposes of 'ventilation', while the future inhabitants were more concerned about 'creating space for intimacy'. In the end, the plans were changed, but half of the homes had already been built.

Location

The rationale for the location of houses is usually that they should be as near as possible to sources of

Box 5: Titles of ownership

The evaluation revealed a great variety of practices among NGOs regarding the transfer of ownership titles of newly-built houses and, if it had been bought by the NGO, of land. In some cases, houses were given as a donation, but the cost of the land had to be reimbursed. Elsewhere, the cost of both the house and the land had to be reimbursed. The terms and conditions and rates of reimbursement also varied significantly.

Since handing over title of ownership is a legal process, local lawyers were involved. But not all beneficiaries realised that, to complete the legal process, they themselves had to ensure that they were listed in the National Property Register.

A particular issue, and one which is recognised by NGOs, is the fact that many couples live together without being legally married. A woman therefore would only be able to make a legal claim to a division of the assets when the relationship ended if the couple had legally registered their co-habitation; this is, however, the exception, rather than the rule. Several NGOs therefore gave property title to both the man and the woman, or even to the woman only, irrespective of marital status.

To avoid the rapid commercialisation of these new assets, restrictions were imposed on their sale, rental and mortgaging. Again, practices between agencies, even those working in the same new settlement, varied widely, with restrictions applying for one, three, five, 10 and even 99 years. It is not clear what follow-up mechanism will ensure that beneficiaries adhere to these terms, nor will all of them be happy with these conditions since they limit their ability to manage their own assets, and take little account of the common practice of economic migration.

What was clearly missing here was a policy on social housing, which could have set common parameters.

employment. The further people have to travel, the more time it takes for them to get to and from work, and the more their cost of living rises. But in many projects, little attention appears to have been paid to this issue. Building a new town several kilometres outside of Choluteca in Honduras, or new *barrios* (neighbourhoods) some distance from the Nicaraguan town of Manantega, meant that displaced people were located a significant distance from the labour market. In other cases, population groups accustomed to living on small family farms in the midst of other scattered housing found themselves in close proximity to others, and several hours' travel from their plots. It is likely that a significant proportion of these people will abandon houses built in the wrong place and move nearer to sources of employment.

The land-rights problem

Obstacles resulting from the long-standing land-rights problem, a major contributing factor to the civil wars of the past 50 years, were part of the reason for the numerous difficulties encountered in setting up building sites. These difficulties led to postponements and delays, and sometimes caused technological choices to be made too hastily because they had taken on greater urgency. This also led to situations where plots of land were being bought by NGOs and other mechanisms set up with humanitarian aid.

All the contributors underlined the lack of a legal framework and tools to address the land-rights problem, as well as the political and economic pressures that accompany it. This issue is a governmental responsibility. However, the governments concerned ignored their obligations, and local authorities did not have the technical and economic resources needed to satisfy the



Rebuilding homes in Nicaragua

Box 6: Avoiding a speculative land market

The destruction of good land by Mitch, and the demand for it in the hurricane's aftermath, led to land speculation and rising prices. In some localities, the price of a *manzana* (a plot of about 7,000 square meters) increased by between three and ten times.

One international NGO with good knowledge of the local context in Honduras stated from the outset that it would not become involved in buying land. Instead, it negotiated with two official authorities, the municipalities and the National Agrarian Institute, a government entity set up during agrarian reforms, with responsibility for managing agricultural land.

requirements of international operators. Furthermore, not infrequently funders bypassed central government in deciding which Mitch victims should be given priority, when the national political structure should not have been overlooked. Lastly, the international community could have demanded that the land-rights question be addressed in return for cancelling debt. After decades of often violent struggle, a wealth of information and experience on the land-rights question is locally available, but most NGOs overlooked it and a negotiating opportunity was therefore lost. A sharper appraisal would have focused attention on the questions of land rights and land management.

After Mitch, the idea of relocating sections of the population was often presented by the authorities in the region – and by certain large international organisations – as a means of combating their vulnerability to natural disasters: people should be prevented from setting up home in 'at risk' areas.

But this thinking does not always analyse why, even when they usually know in general what the risks are, people still choose to live in areas prone to flooding, erosion, landslides, and seismic activity. If the state wants to protect its people – and it is its responsibility to do so – it has to tackle the reasons why people choose to live in high-risk areas, rather than simply moving them elsewhere.

Health

Epidemic control

Epidemiological monitoring during the emergency phase was effective, and secondary epidemics following the collapse of water and sanitation systems

and weakened public-health services did not occur. There were only small, localised outbreaks of malaria, dengue fever and diarrhoea, while cholera, which is endemic, did not get any worse.

Several factors contributed to this good level of epidemiological control. First, by using mobile clinics emergency operators were able to record statistics on a daily basis for all the pathologies they came across, even in places far away from care centres. These figures were compared with pre-existing data gathered by local institutions, which meant that measures could be taken to tackle each outbreak before it spread. Second, well-trained and rapidly-deployable *brigadistas* (groups of volunteers) had been in existence for many years, making it possible to rapidly dispose of the vast numbers of animal carcasses before they caused pollution which might have led to illness. Third, a reasonable level of vaccination prevented fatal complications, especially for the large numbers of *damnificados* (victims) suffering from respiratory illnesses after being left soaked, homeless and without medical care. Finally, the drop in water levels on the third day after the hurricane helped in retaining epidemic control.

Financing the health sector

This relatively good record in epidemic control contrasts with general deficiencies in curative and preventive medicine. Health privatisation means that only a minority of people benefit from quality care. In the public sector, budgets for equipment, medicines and running costs do not exist, or have been cut, and the law forbidding public institutions from recovering even part of the costs they incur has not been challenged. Staff have become demoralised, and already-fragile healthcare provision has been further weakened. This has meant, for example, the closure of health centres because they were not receiving the minimum amount of medicines necessary to treat routine problems. This lack of lower-level treatment then puts increasing pressure on hospitals. In one location, a health centre had to organise a raffle to buy detergent to clean its premises. Elsewhere, the running costs of a 'white elephant' hospital (a gift from the Spanish Overseas Development Agency) are equivalent to half the national funding for this budget expenditure. The Ministry of Health in Nicaragua is now talking about rationalising human resources, but this will not solve the structural problem of financing a health system that has not been properly costed and budgeted.

In the field of preventive medicine, the situation is even worse since there is virtually no public-health

strategy, and no health policy geared towards current needs. Although there are systems in place to monitor vectors and parasites, these are cumbersome because they try to be too comprehensive, thereby making heavy time and resource demands, and producing less useable results. Furthermore, there is no single national system but several different ones, as varied as the private donors which set them up. Thus, courtesy of development aid, a Canadian system runs alongside a European one, each using different programmes and prioritising different issues, depending on the system in use, rather than on local needs.

One of the most urgent tasks is therefore to bring these different systems into line. Some NGOs understand this, and have gone beyond simply supplying medicines to health centres to providing technical and institutional support to address these issues. But much remains to be done if the notion of 'public health' is to replace that of 'monitoring tropical diseases' which, though necessary, is not sufficient on its own. For example, there is no AIDS screening, nor is there any data on why people are hospitalised (through acts of violence, alcohol abuse or nutritional deficiencies, for example). This type of information would help to determine public-health priorities in countries with very limited resources and no structured prevention work.

Psychological care and social health

In the wake of the hurricane, several 'psychological care' groups were set up. These were designed to get victims to talk about what had happened to them in order to alleviate post-Mitch stress. While the effectiveness of these groups in 'managing' Mitch-related trauma might be questioned, they did have an unexpected secondary effect in that they brought domestic violence to light. This meant that lessons were learned about the causes of psychosocial problems, over and above those specifically related to Mitch.

Emergency aid and the national health sector

International aid, whether through NGOs or international institutions, should no longer be medical in the therapeutic sense or in terms of providing equipment and medicines. Two areas need to be addressed. In the technical field, aid should assist in providing tools for the operation of information and financial-management systems, and extending the use of these tools for planning purposes, so that priorities and strategies can be defined. In terms of reducing vulnerability, measures beyond the strictly medical are urgently needed. These include concrete steps to reduce food shortages and nutritional deficiencies, not only to

improve accessibility to consumer products, but also through palliative measures such as adding iodine to cooking salt and iron and Vitamin A to sugar. This is done in other countries at a similar economic level, and would require very little financial outlay in return for a very marked gain in terms of health and the reduction of certain pathologies.

Beyond educating people in daily cleanliness practices, a policy for managing water, refuse and drainage in urban areas must be adopted. These two issues are linked, and should be implemented as a matter of urgency in every population centre built with international aid.

Lastly, antiquated education systems increase vulnerability. Improving girls' education, for example, has a greater effect on the number of births and the quality of child-rearing than the best-designed health-education campaigns targeted at the illiterate.

The challenge here is similar to that posed by housing: how can micro-level project interventions be linked to larger national policy questions?

Food security

Most farmers in Central America rely on a first (*primera*) and a second (*postera*) harvest to get them through the 'hungry season' before the next rains. *Apante* is a late-season cultivation that uses residual ground moisture following a flood to raise another crop where neither rainfall nor irrigation is possible.

However, not all farming communities are accustomed to this technique, or enjoy the physical conditions which permit it.

Responses to the food insecurity resulting from Mitch can be divided into four broad categories.

1) Food aid

The region's fortunes in the wake of Mitch were inextricably bound up with the precarious situation inherited from the previous year, and the food-aid programmes set up following *El Niño*. Although these supplies had arrived later than scheduled in the 1998 action plans, they were present in significant quantities when Mitch struck. This enabled the World Food Programme (WFP) to carry out fast, high-quality work.⁵ The Food for Work (FFW) programmes allowed many peasants to remain near their plots, thereby preventing mass migration to Costa Rica and the US.

However, food aid, especially when it arrived during the harvest period, led to competition between international actors and local producers in areas less affected or untouched by the crisis. Even when the choice is made to buy locally, the cost of local products compared to US prices, and the fact that distributing them can often be more difficult than sending supplies from abroad, can pose equally serious problems. There were also examples of situations seen elsewhere in the world, where one agency provided free food in the same area as another was organising FFW schemes.

Table 2: The impact of Hurricane Mitch on agricultural production, October 1998–November 1999

Activity	Month													
	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov
<i>Primera</i> farming season														
<i>Postera</i> farming season														
<i>Apante</i> farming season														
Usual 'hungry season'														
Cash-crop harvest														
Impact of Mitch	1, 2, 5, 6	3, 4, 5, 6	3, 4, 5, 6	3, 6, 7	3, 6, 7	3, 7	3, 7	3, 7	7	7	7	7	7	7

- Effect 1: Destruction of stocks (harvest from the *primera* season)
 Effect 2: Destruction of crops still in the fields (beginning of the *postera* season)
 Effect 3: Difficulties in bridging the food gap during the 'hungry season'
 Effect 4: Lack of inputs (seeds, fertilizer, tools) for the *postera* and *apante* seasons
 Effect 5: Damage to cash crops
 Effect 6: Damage to marketing systems
 Effect 7: Loss of access to land due to population displacement

2) Aid in the form of seeds and other agricultural supplies

This was important for the small number of peasant farmers who were able to take advantage of the 1998–99 *apante* season. But for most, the imperative was to be able to sow their land for the 1999 *primera* season. They thus needed to obtain enough seeds and other inputs in time to do so. At a technical level, it seems that monoculture, which is supposed to increase yield, can entail increased risks and can therefore sometimes be counter-productive. Some NGOs became involved in programmes promoting this technique without possessing a good understanding of the logic behind the systems used by peasant farmers.

3) Aid to get agricultural credit systems up and running again

This included rescheduling loans, allowing repayment arrangements to carry on so that there was no change in the nature of the commitments made by lenders, and launching new loan schemes. The success of these programmes depended heavily on how long they had been in operation.⁶

4) Setting up or reviving action-research and methodological and institutional support for vulnerability and needs assessment

Only a few French actors became involved in this area of work, which was facilitated by the fact that there had been strong links for many years between institutions in the region, especially in Nicaragua, and French structures, such as the Centre International de Recherche pour l'Agriculture et le Développement (International Centre for Agricultural and Developmental Research, CIRAD), the Institut National Agronomique Paris-Grignon (National Agronomic Institute, Paris-Grignon, INAP-G) and GRET. Unlike in the housing programmes, this assured good technical support.

Some agencies also started 'soup kitchen'-type programmes, but without a clearly-identified exit strategy. Are these types of approach appropriate? What sort of follow-up will there be for such programmes?

With regard to the FFW programmes, it seems that a significant number had a positive impact in the short term in that they allowed peasants to stay on their land. However, in order to have access to a FFW 'habitat' programme, it was necessary to be registered with an NGO rehousing project. The incentive of an FFW programme meant that people were attracted to these kinds of reconstruction schemes, while people who wanted to rebuild their



Self-help and Food for Work in San Juan, Nicaragua

homes, either on their own land or nearby, were not entitled to any such support.

Lastly, as is frequently seen in crises, large amounts of food aid went on pouring into the area well after needs had reached their peak. It is important to think about whether this kind of aid in the aftermath of a crisis, often in the framework of 'social assistance' or reconstruction programmes, is really an appropriate allocation of resources. For farmers there is a risk that such free aid will hamper their attempts to revive agriculture and get marketing networks up and running again.

Cross-cutting themes

Rethinking 'emergency response'

It would be wrong to place international aid at the centre of the rescue and survival activities that followed Hurricane Mitch; instead, neighbourhood solidarity without doubt saved most lives. It started within 24 hours, with the other types of help arriving later and in varying amounts. At this early stage of the aid operation, very few outside organisations could really get involved. In the first two days after the disaster struck, only structures which were already prepared and which had the logistical capabilities, for example Médecins sans Frontières

(MSF) in Central America, civil-defence organisations or national armies, could help.⁷

In these conditions, it is clear that the key to immediate effectiveness lies in preparation work. This should be carried out at two levels:

- by networks in the immediate vicinity (neighbours, Red Cross volunteers); and
- by local and national rapid-deployment capabilities (fire brigades, civil-defence personnel or the army).

Unless it is prepositioned to support local and national mechanisms, international aid is unlikely to be very effective in the immediate rescue and survival phase.

Needs assessment and monitoring

The French evaluation revealed major weaknesses in the appraisals carried out by those involved in the humanitarian response. One of the most noticeable errors was the failure to take into account the different needs of each zone and population group, and to monitor changes in people's needs and priorities.

The appraisal stage is crucial. Through it, the needs of the population can be identified, and the appropriate strategies for dealing with them defined. Any appraisal must be anchored in local conditions, not 'supply'- and 'service'-driven (on the basis of existing resources, specialisms or skills and standards) or, worse still, 'donor-driven'. The quality of the appraisal will determine which sectors should be the focus, and which intervention strategies and management methods should be used throughout the project, including follow-up and evaluation mechanisms.

Access is a *sine qua non* of any appraisal. The logistical difficulties faced over the first few weeks, resulting from the extensive disruption of routes into the areas most affected by Mitch, were among the reasons given for sometimes concentrating humanitarian action in non-priority areas, although political reasons for choosing one area over another were also cited. Reopening roads and other means of communication as soon as emergency operations begin is one of the most urgent tasks that need to be addressed during this period. A partnership with the local military on logistical matters could have improved access.

The rapid transition from an emergency to a post-emergency situation complicated the appraisal. Operators continued to focus on 'very short-term'

Box 7: The coordination of French NGOs in Managua

In the heat of the emergency, coordination was subordinate to the need to get established and become operational. NGOs only started coming together around the preparations for the May 1999 Stockholm conference, when five meetings took place. There did not, however, seem to have been much experience with setting up a functioning coordination effort, nor did there seem to be much clarity about its objectives. The limitation of the participants to French agencies and the failure to gather around geographical and thematic questions were weaknesses which need to be avoided in future.

actions, which meant that practices that were appropriate for an emergency were mixed up with those more suited to post-emergency needs. In such a transitional period, it is essential to react swiftly. Follow-up/monitoring techniques, which allow the appraisal to be amended as the situation changes, were also inadequate.

Partnerships with local actors

The problems involved in working in partnership with local organisations varied depending on whether international NGOs had a presence on the ground before the disaster. Everyone recognised that there was a wealth of local know-how, but at the time many did not seem to try to make use of it. Where this was possible, working with local partners turned out to be very beneficial. It meant that appraisals were carried out more quickly and were more reliable, and it was possible to work more swiftly and appropriately.

Quality work and building on past experience

Many NGOs recognise that they have not put enough work into building on past experience. Despite the fact that experiences of previous natural disasters have been well-documented, the actors did not use – and perhaps were even unaware of – the lessons that had been identified. They are still sceptical about the utility of such information in an emergency. Any attempt to improve the quality of aid programmes comes up against 'amnesia' at the level of organisations, a problem exacerbated by the rapid turnover of volunteers.

Disseminating information: the key to good coordination

Access to, and circulation of, information are important factors during field operations. The communications technology and equipment available to the field teams were often inadequate

for them to carry out proper assessments and do good work, and kept them cut off from information they needed in order to identify the geographical areas and population groups requiring support. Sharing and disseminating information between NGOs and funders is also a problem, and can prevent programme adjustments from being made. Sometimes information is only shared between families of NGOs, especially at the level of field teams, thus limiting opportunities to take advantage of the complementary nature of the whole group of actors.

In the case of Mitch, the centralisation of economic resources in the hands of a single funding body in

France prevented the 'race to be first on the ground' which was a feature in other emergency responses, and which wasted time and led to a loss of credibility in the eyes of the authorities and the beneficiaries. The coordination system set up by the Task Force in Paris ensured that information was circulated, and that there was consultation between NGO offices and the FDF and the French government. This system is worth using in the future. However, efforts at coordination within the Task Force were not always replicated by the NGO head offices *vis-à-vis* their field teams. This is an area where improvement is clearly required. French NGOs also failed to involve themselves deeply in international coordination efforts.

The Disaster Response: Main Findings of the British Evaluation

Geographical coverage and targeting of communities

Overall, the geographical coverage of the response by DEC member agencies was adequate, with agencies and their partners working in some of the communities most devastated by Mitch.

Agencies chose a wide variety of strategies to reach and work with affected communities. Some of the better projects were in areas where agencies or partners had previously worked, where there were pre-existing relationships. Other agencies ventured into new areas, covering populations that had received little or no aid from the government or other humanitarian organisations. These agencies had to rely on new counterparts with knowledge of targeted regions and communities.

Recently-settled former guerrillas and refugees from decades of war live in several of the communities that received DEC-funded aid. These included Suchitepéquez and Retalhuleu in Guatemala, and communities in El Salvador's Lower Lempa Valley. Many of these displaced and resettled people receive scant welfare provision or employment, and face a permanent state of dire poverty. This made prioritising need extremely difficult, since livelihoods are precarious and needs many. As such, some counterparts faced major moral and operational challenges in working in these marginal agrarian communities. Massive infrastructure damage made access to these remote communities sometimes very difficult. Nonetheless, many of these communities were reached. Often, they comprised ethnic groups which have historically been outcasts from national societies: Kekchis in Guatemala, Garifuna and Miskito in Honduras and Miskito in Nicaragua, for example.

Needs assessment

During the first weeks after the disaster, several approaches to identifying needs were adopted. The first, in the days immediately after the onset of the emergency, used official sources and rapid appraisals carried out by international humanitarian organisations. In most countries, UN Disaster Management Teams (DMTs) produced periodic reports on loss of life, wounded and missing persons, and infrastructure damage. Some of the larger DEC member organisations conducted their own data-gathering activities through local counterparts. This allowed the hardest-hit communities to be identified, and enabled priorities to be set in the provision of food aid and relief items. But most of the DEC-funded emergency-phase activities were initiated on the basis of information gathered at national level, with only a limited level of detail concerning local conditions and the coping strategies and demands of populations.

The second way in which needs were identified involved many of the agencies' local counterparts, and used surveys, rapid rural appraisals and participatory appraisals. Those agencies with field staff in place worked closely with municipal committees and community-based organisations in establishing inventories of damage and determining priorities for short-term relief. These community-based assessments also informed the design of rehabilitation and reconstruction projects. For example, one Nicaraguan partner identified needs beyond the emergency phase, which allowed food security to be quickly restored through training, credit and the purchase of machinery and agricultural implements. Some agencies conducted surveys in communities, allowing aid packages to be designed which responded to the priorities of beneficiaries.

In some cases, external consultants were contracted to identify needs in the weeks following the disaster. Communities did not generally participate in these outside assessments, and the resulting aid packages were sometimes ill-conceived and poorly delivered. The need for reliable information about affected communities also led some agencies to spend a great deal of time compiling baseline data from the field. But there was often a trade-off between the search for a thorough understanding of the communities to be served and the need for rapid implementation.

The technical-assistance packages chosen by agencies and their counterparts following the needs assessment were questioned in some communities. In particular, the distribution of aid packages to all families without regard to their size caused tension. The design of family relief packages, as a matter of standard practice, should take into account differences in family size, gender composition and household income – even using two differently-sized aid packages might have avoided some of the discrepancies between families with only one child and those with many, for example.

In El Salvador, the evaluation team identified a clear absence of psychological help for the most severely-

affected communities in the Lower Lempa. Throughout the region, there was scant evidence that psychological and emotional needs were properly identified and considered. In conversations with beneficiaries, emotional issues were often mentioned as powerful factors in the aftermath of the hurricane.

By and large, DEC-funded projects served the neediest people in the communities affected. However, in their urgency to respond, few DEC agencies considered how to differentiate between families who had been affected by the disaster specifically, and those who were simply poor. While this is understandable, the underlying question of structural vulnerability looms large in the minds of most Central Americans, particularly following the devastation caused by Mitch.

Most DEC member agencies recognised that communities themselves were best able to identify the needy. Thus, the vast majority of projects visited during the evaluation reported that some form of community-level survey was carried out, usually by the local emergency committee or village leadership council. One Nicaraguan partner, for instance, trained the women's committees of two *barrios* in Managua in rapid participatory assessments, resulting in accurate, egalitarian surveys of family needs.

Box 8: Criteria for identifying beneficiaries

The criteria used to identify beneficiaries varied widely from project to project, and were not always clearly explained to affected communities. In the case of one agency working in El Salvador, while the early distribution of relief and survival items went to the neediest families, there were some oversights and miscommunication about criteria for participation in the agricultural-support programme, resulting in the exclusion of the poorest people, who had no access to land. This error was subsequently corrected, but the operational criteria still caused confusion. In the communities of La Quinta and San Pedro in Estelí, Nicaragua, farmers' wives were asked how many *manzanas* their husbands worked, inducing some to exaggerate in the hope of greater assistance, and others to report as entire *manzanas* plots which were actually share-cropped. This misunderstanding again resulted in the exclusion of several poorer families. In effect, there is little real economic difference between a farmer who works three *manzanas* (the arbitrary cut-off point chosen by one agency in some areas) and one who tills five. As many of the informants noted during the participatory evaluation workshops: 'We are all economically affected by Mitch'.

Where setting the criteria for 'neediness' was left to communities, members sometimes held beneficiaries to even stricter standards than did aid organisations. However, relying on existing community leaders also offered opportunities for favouritism, political cronyism and other abuses of power. In many instances, the agencies accepted the community leadership's list of beneficiaries as final, although some carried out follow-up investigations to ensure that the right people had been chosen for assistance. In practice, communities tended to enforce fairness in the distribution of benefits. In two communities visited, for example, the emergency committees were replaced as a result of popular dissatisfaction with the unfairness and inefficiency of their leaders.

DEC-funded projects tended to favour women and children in the distribution of goods and services. One agency's cash component in an agricultural-support programme in Guatemala and Nicaragua went directly to the women of agricultural families, in the form of a cheque in their name. Beneficiaries of both sexes overwhelmingly approved of this, both as a security measure – 'The cash didn't disappear into *guaro* (alcohol)' – and as an empowering step for women (although some male farmers grumbled

that the next package ought to favour the men). Beneficiaries reported that, where the couple had a relatively good relationship, the money was wisely spent. Other examples of women being included in productive activities include the poultry-raising components of agricultural projects in Achuapa in Nicaragua and Suchitepéquez, Guatemala; and cement block-making for construction in Guacamaya, Honduras, and Posoltega, Nicaragua. In Posoltega and Marcovia in Honduras, titles for self-built houses were given to women, rather than men. Women were welcomed into work brigades on construction projects, such as roads, housing and bridges, breaking some hardened stereotypes about their working capacity.

The level of beneficiary participation

Effective relief and lasting rehabilitation can best be achieved where the intended beneficiaries are involved in the design, management and implementation of the assistance programs.

The Code of Conduct, Red Cross Movement and INGOs

DEC-funded projects generally succeeded in involving beneficiaries closely in the implementation of projects and, to some extent, in their management. The widespread use of self-construction techniques in rebuilding social infrastructure demonstrated DEC agencies' recognition of the importance of 'sweat equity' in relief interventions. In fact, the evaluation mission observed a high degree of community ownership of projects, in the sense that villages formed committees to run projects, organised work brigades and, in some cases, created structures to continue monitoring the needs of communities. However, due to time constraints most of the projects did not undertake a complete training programme, and many counterparts mentioned the inflexibility of funding to support training activities.

Although agencies involved beneficiaries in the actual implementation of projects, it was not common for their views to be elicited *before* projects were implemented. Few house-building projects sought the participation of beneficiaries in the design of new homes or in planning water and sanitation systems. There could also be problems with incorporating the views of beneficiaries into the design of projects. One agency solicited input on a housing and sanitation project in Nicaragua, but was then unable to act on the suggestions due to the rigidity of its own programme and its decision to spend less money per home in order

to build more. Several agencies felt that the tight schedule imposed by the DEC worked against more participatory approaches.

Clearly, there are technical skills that only specialists have. However, greater involvement by beneficiaries in the approval and format of basic social infrastructure could have avoided some of the problems that resulted from 'top-down' project design, including the potential for discomfort, social friction, economic hardship and health dangers. For example, consulting women's groups about housing design in El Cerro, Choluteca, Honduras, might have informed the implementing agency of the need to include an outside *sumidero* (a drainage system for a common washing area), or the type of roofing materials most appropriate to the climate.

Box 9: The level of beneficiary participation

Participation included a wide range of activities, in addition to the appraisal and beneficiary identification described above. Some agencies allowed communities to define the criteria for projects, within existing budgets. One partner organisation in El Salvador left it to community members to choose between a housing-construction project for those people who actually lost their homes in the disaster, and a housing-repair programme to benefit all the poor. The community chose the latter. Many agencies relied upon community members to carry out the basic technical activities of the project, usually under the guidance of a trained expert. Construction projects imparted valuable technical skills to women as well as men, many through a 'learning by doing' approach to masonry, carpentry and road-building. Some beneficiaries travelled to Stockholm and participated in the donor review of post-Mitch rehabilitation.

Effects on existing coping strategies

Specialists in humanitarian emergencies have long pointed out the importance of self-help on the part of affected people themselves. These coping mechanisms may be individual or collective, short-term or long-term, conscious or unconscious, often reflecting the best efforts of ordinary people caught up in extraordinary situations. Particularly in the early days after the hurricane, before international organisations had the access, personnel or funding to assist affected communities, Central Americans were already making decisions about how to react.

One of the key decisions made by numerous farming families was to stay in their traditional areas



Interviewing a woman in Nicaragua

rather than relocate, and to continue working their farms with whatever seeds and tools were at their disposal. A number of DEC agencies and partners chose to prioritise agriculture for relief and rehabilitation. The provision of seeds, agricultural inputs and, in some cases, cash supported farming families who had decided to stay in their communities despite massive losses in harvest, housing, fields and livelihood. One Nicaraguan organisation went further. It brought a Cuban agricultural-extension specialist familiar with *apante* cultivation and other techniques to the community of Achuapa to make the most of the post-flood conditions. Later in the agricultural year, credit was given for equipment such as irrigation pumps, hoses and a communal tractor, all of which are atypical types of assistance in response to an emergency. Another organisation in Nicaragua advised people to sow white beans, watermelons and sesame as cash crops, and to grow maize in the off-season.

Unfortunately, the agricultural yield was quite poor in Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, but for other reasons. The rains, a plague of slugs and other unforeseeable conditions upset the calculations of DEC agencies that had relied on a post-hurricane agricultural boom. The impact of these agricultural interventions was also reduced because of farmers' mounting debts. Interest rose on seed, land and housing credits, some of which had been obtained to fund crops that were then destroyed by Mitch, resulting in harvests being sold at low prices to meet repayments.

Nonetheless, the agricultural intervention may have had a positive impact on psychosocial recovery, as farming families were able to return rapidly to a

sort of normality. It was beyond the capacity of the evaluation to calculate the numbers of potential migrants and emigrants who remained in place as a result of these interventions, but the economic value to the region of a stabilised population was clearly very high. Indeed, in virtually every community visited by the evaluation team, beneficiaries were overwhelmingly grateful for the agricultural assistance they had received.

There was, however, a negative aspect to the agricultural intervention. One agency decided to introduce hybrid

seeds, albeit with some trepidation, in Guatemala – a historic centre of maize cultivation – and in southern Nicaragua. The deleterious impact of introducing improved seeds has been well-documented in other contexts, in terms of maintenance and replacement costs to the farmer, as well as in its effect on seed stock.

The 'planned obsolescence' of hybrid seeds is a source of heated debate among agronomists throughout the world. The deliberate choice to provide a resource to farmers that produces greater yield in the short term, but fosters dependency and decreased crop-diversity in the long, should be analysed carefully. To its credit, the agency designed the cash component of its agricultural-support programme precisely to enable farmers to buy their own preferred seeds locally, rather than imposing hybrids. The move towards improved species may be unstoppable, in light of the fact that the region's agricultural ministries have been importing hybrids for some years. However, some NGOs pushed improved species in areas that had not been exposed to them, and it is important to be aware of the economic burden imposed on individual farmers, and of the potential consequences for the bio-diversity of the region as a whole.

Strengths and weaknesses of the DEC-funded interventions

Overall, the DEC-funded interventions were strong in a number of areas. Many water projects, for example, restored a regular supply to communities that had lost access to drinking water. Short- and long-term food security also increased, and some construction, reconstruction and relocation projects were also successful. Outstanding examples were

projects in El Progreso, Los Anises and Comayagua in Honduras, and the adoption of a new style of housing in areas of El Salvador subject to frequent flooding.

In addition, individual and community capacity was built in a number of areas. Many projects strengthened community organisations and increased solidarity among beneficiaries. Some trained beneficiaries in, for example, health matters, house construction, self-help, agriculture and sanitation.

Vulnerable groups also benefited from the interventions. Some of the projects in the sample had a positive impact on the position of women, who became more visible in their communities through a number of measures: training; targeted cash aid; participation in activities not traditionally done by women; involvement in identifying needs and beneficiaries; and the registration of new houses in women's names. Projects also expanded the role of children and teenagers in several communities.

However, there were also areas of weakness. Many DEC agencies managed to purchase land, allocate plots, and in some cases even provide titles for self-constructed housing within a year of the hurricane. In a region so prone to land conflict, this was no small feat, particularly in such a short space of time. However, the geographical placement of new communities has caused serious problems, for example in Fe y Esperanza, Nicaragua, and Siguatepeque in Honduras. The lack of economic activity in newly-constructed neighbourhoods threatens to turn once-active farmers into passive recipients of assistance, while displaced farmers who continue to work their traditional plots must now make long trips to reach their fields.

It is difficult to criticise the actions of well-intentioned NGOs which have been so successful in relocating those whose homes were destroyed or rendered too dangerous to inhabit, yet post-emergency recovery projects need to take into account precisely those factors most important to beneficiaries: where they work, how they get there, and whether providing a new house justifies making it more difficult to earn a living. Many housing projects also encountered particular difficulties; one agency's project in Renacer Marcovia, Choluteca, Honduras, for example, did not provide enough room for vegetable gardens and livestock.

There were also weaknesses in the area of health. In some projects, partner organisations collected and distributed drugs which were often close to their expiry date, not adapted to local needs and lacking labels in local languages, or which were unknown

to community health workers. DEC agencies should have encouraged their partners to respect and publicise WHO's essential drug policy.

Of particular concern is the fact that many projects may have had the unanticipated effect of plunging already-vulnerable households further into debt, a point made by several communities during the evaluation process. Some projects required beneficiaries to incur greater expenditure – for example for water connections, housing fees and agricultural credit – without providing opportunities for more income.

The evaluation team also noted the extent to which Mitch revealed existing poverty, inequality and structural social and environmental vulnerability in the region. In many cases, relief and rehabilitation interventions did little to reduce high levels of vulnerability, the nature and scale of which require developmental policies and instruments.

Scaling-up: capacity and competence

Peter Uvin has suggested that there are four types of scaling-up:

- *quantitative scaling-up*: including increasing budget and geographical area;
- *functional scaling-up*: increasing the number or types of activities;
- *political scaling-up*: challenging the structural causes of poverty and inequality; and
- *organisational scaling-up*: improving an NGO's own organisational strength.⁸

Scaling-up after Mitch

These four aspects of scaling-up are closely linked, and mutually interdependent. The 'companion study' to the DEC evaluation, *Scaling-up After Hurricane Mitch: A Lesson-Learning Study for the Disasters Emergency Committee* of 1999, assessed the extent to which DEC agencies and their local partners scaled-up quantitatively and functionally after Hurricane Mitch, and the organisational requirements of doing so. (Political scaling-up is also of crucial importance to agencies working on issues of vulnerability in Central America, but it was not a focus of the study. Although many DEC agencies were involved in advocacy work in the aftermath of Mitch, especially around debt relief, they tended to use their own funds for this, and only a tiny proportion of advocacy was funded by DEC money.)

Common constraints

Scaling-up was complicated by a number of common constraints to do with information, access and coordination.

continued on page 25

Box 10: Scaling-up**Quantitative scaling-up**

All the agencies experienced a significant degree of quantitative scaling-up. Financial resources increased sharply; one agency, for example, received up to five times its previous annual budget for the region in the six months to May 1999. All of the agencies also worked in geographical areas which were new to them, and one agency worked in Latin America for the first time.

Agencies and their partners had to address the tension between the quality of intervention and its scale. A number of non-operational agencies and their local partners were reluctant to risk significant quantitative scaling-up as they were aware of the limits of their own capacity, and that of their partners. Often, it was the stronger organisations which recognised their limitations, and decided not to extend their interventions.

Functional scaling-up

Most agencies and their partners also scaled-up functionally, becoming involved in new sectors. Many agencies worked in the complex area of housing for the first time in the region. Others did work they had never before undertaken anywhere; organisations with expertise in child advocacy, for example, ran service-delivery operations for the first time.

Organisational scaling-up: being operational and/or working through partners

There was a wide range of different organisational responses to the disaster by agencies, and the extent of organisational scaling-up correlated closely with agency decisions as to whether to work operationally in the region after the hurricane, work only through counterparts, or do both.

Many of the DEC agencies had a long history of supporting local organisations in Central America. Five remained non-operational, three worked operationally through their local sister agencies, and two operated a mixed model, remaining non-operational in some areas, but working operationally in the south of Honduras. Both these agencies experienced significant organisational scaling-up, recruiting in relatively large numbers locally, as well as receiving staff on short-term visits and secondments. Most of the agencies which normally worked through partners also engaged with new ones in the wake of Mitch as the scale of the disaster and the resources available became apparent. Agencies reported no significant differences in their relationships between existing and new partners, perhaps because they tended to work with new partners already known to them in some way, or recommended to them by other agencies.

In general, the companion study found that the projects of organisations which worked through partners were particularly strong in identifying needs, and allowed for relatively high levels of beneficiary participation. However, they tended to be particularly weak in ensuring sufficient technical quality. In contrast, implementing agencies tended to have stronger technical capacity, but allowed lower levels of beneficiary involvement. Those organisations which worked in international federations were particularly effective at drawing on experience and emergency capacity from other parts of their organisation in other regions.

Those agencies which struggled to scale up their own capacity after Mitch provided the weakest support to their local partners. This was particularly noticeable in the crucial areas of needs assessment and the design of project proposals. Weaknesses in the experience or capacity of partners were sometimes not detected at the project-design stage. Agencies generally did not ensure that there was adequate technical capacity within, or contracted by, their local partner organisations, even though partners were often working in unfamiliar sectors.

A trade-off was frequently made between delivering services and building capacity. This affected agencies differently, but tended to be most acute for those which had the capacity and experience to respond operationally. It was less acute for those which either did not have operational capacity, or considered working through local organisations to be their most appropriate response.

Human resources

Problems around recruiting and seconding staff were one of the largest constraints to scaling-up. Agencies and partners wanted Spanish-speaking, technically-skilled personnel with knowledge of the region, as well as emergency experience. The emergency departments of many British agencies are strongly Africa-focused,

and a number have no Spanish speakers. In very few cases were such people found quickly, and all agencies had to make compromises. Some took more than nine months to recruit key personnel. Additionally, the timing of Mitch caused delays, as the recruitment of most emergency project officers was left until after the Christmas holidays.

In the region, the most serious shortages were of middle and senior managers, and sufficiently skilled water and civil engineers. In Honduras, the salary of a local water engineer tripled in the three months after Mitch, and there are reports of 'poaching' by international agencies. The imbalance in the labour market caused serious problems for local governmental and non-governmental bodies, which struggled even to maintain their own capacity. This remains a problem, especially in Honduras. Additionally, local organisations faced the serious challenge of trying to maintain equity between the salaries of existing and new personnel.

Disaster preparedness

Lack of preparedness also made it more difficult for agencies to scale up themselves, and to provide appropriate support to local partners. While most agencies had some disaster plans, they were generally outdated and did not make provision for a disaster as widespread and destructive as Mitch. Most of the DEC agencies in the region had experience of smaller-scale emergencies, particularly related to conflict and refugees. For historical reasons, this was weakest in Honduras, although in certain areas there was considerable experience of localised flooding. However, agency development staff, both in the UK and in the region itself, reported that they lacked the experience necessary to deal with such a large-scale disaster. Many staff members stated that they needed clear guidance on appropriate first steps, the type of assessments required, and the international organisations with which to coordinate.

A related requirement is the need to invest in the preparedness of local partner organisations. This includes training personnel in appropriate disaster response, and considering the development of a more systematic approach to identifying local partner capacity. For example, one DEC agency is considering producing a 'checklist' of essential topics that need to be discussed with a local partner when assessing its capacity for emergency response. This would enable agencies to identify in advance possible partners with sufficient capacity to respond to large-scale emergencies.

Relief or development?

Finally, DEC agencies and their local partners differed over whether to put existing development programmes on hold in order to concentrate entirely on the emergency. In the acute phase, almost all regionally-based agency staff and their local partners concentrated exclusively on their response to Mitch. After a few months, many agencies and some local partners, especially in countries where the destruction was less widespread than in Honduras, gradually restarted work on their previous programmes. As new emergency personnel were recruited, some organisations restructured to allow existing staff to resume pre-Mitch work.

Quality of information

In the initial emergency period, it was difficult to obtain a reliable picture of the overall situation. In Honduras, the lack of a centralised information source was particularly acute, and caused immense problems and confusion for national and international emergency responses. In the initial period, governments in Guatemala and El Salvador were better at coordinating information than administrations in the rest of the region.

Access and logistics

Infrastructure damage made access extremely difficult. As a result, costs per unit of relief aid tended to increase dramatically. Flying relief items from London to San Pedro Sula, for example, was cheaper than doing so from San Pedro Sula to the Mosquito Coast in Honduras' Gracias a Dios region. This inaccessibility also caused considerable delays and

problems in delivering relief. Even once major routes were open, repairing secondary roads was a slow process; areas of Honduras, for example, were still inaccessible in February 1999.

Procurement was another major problem faced by several agencies, especially in Honduras, where part of the capital Tegucigalpa was destroyed and aid organisations competed to buy relief items and charter flights and transports. In the first months after Mitch, when Honduras faced a shortage of maize seeds and other agricultural inputs, the government took over some shipments of seeds in order to meet demand. All of this caused delays in getting the seeds and inputs to farmers before the end of the planting season.

Coordination

Another problem had to do with poor coordination between governmental, non-governmental,

international and national bodies. This was mostly due to the absence of a strong, central coordinating entity. The problem was exacerbated by the influx of new agencies into the region once the airports reopened. Some sources suggested that 90 international NGOs with no previous experience in the region entered Honduras in the first three months after Mitch. Many made excessive demands for information from those agencies which already had regional experience. In Honduras, the existing forum for coordination between international NGOs collapsed under this pressure.⁹

Lack of coordination also intensified the competition for resources. Markets were unbalanced in a number of areas, and fuelled by international agencies with tight spending deadlines. Supplies of

building materials and agricultural supplies such as hosing in Nicaragua were especially affected, and prices rose steeply in the months after Mitch.

While the DEC's appeal mechanism requires a considerable level of cooperation between agencies, programme coordination between them was also poor, with the exception of some field-level coordination and a number of existing bilateral relationships. This can be attributed to a number of factors, including excessive demands on staff time, poor information from UK offices and the DEC, competition for media coverage, and the fact that the natural coordinating sphere for many organisations is within their own 'family'. Most DEC agencies recognise that better coordination would have improved their overall response and impact.

5

Designing Evaluations ... and Learning from Them

The studies summarised here offer valuable insights into commissioning and focusing evaluations, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of emergency response and its limitations. They raise the question of what the role and responsibilities of a fundraising platform/donor can and should be, and how organisations can learn from experience.

Designing evaluations

Three aspects of evaluations are highlighted here: scale, timing, and the questions and topics to be explored.

The scale of an evaluation

Unusually, both evaluation exercises covered several agencies, rather than just one. The team in the British evaluation was significantly larger than that in the French. It also covered four rather than two countries, and spent more time in the field. As a result, its absolute cost was three times higher than the French evaluation's, but in percentage terms both cost around 1 per cent of the total amounts raised.

Studying the performance of various agencies in a variety of sectors and with a regional scope is a challenge of significant complexity, creating major logistical, planning and data-processing problems. In particular, the large team in the British evaluation struggled to apply frameworks and methodologies consistently, and learned the vital importance of joint planning sessions for the whole team before any field work is undertaken.

The timing of an evaluation and time spent in the field

The French team conducted its fieldwork some 10 months after Hurricane Mitch struck, the British-contracted team about a year later. By then, however, many people's memories of the phase immediately after the emergency had become hazy, and it was

difficult to establish a chronology of response decisions and activities. Moreover, few agencies had satisfactory baseline data, so judgements about the impact of interventions were largely subjective. The relative 'lateness' of both evaluations also meant that they were not useful for redirecting ongoing programmes – one reason why current thinking wants to see much more emphasis on improved monitoring during the implementation of programmes, rather than on higher-profile evaluations afterwards.

In many ways, field work offers the most interesting insights, yet the time allowed evaluators is often too short to properly examine all the questions or topics in the terms of reference. In the British evaluation, for example, the evaluators chose to focus on the priorities of the people who suffered the disaster, and assess how appropriately and effectively their needs had been addressed. That choice was reflected in the participatory methodology. But this inevitably left little time to explore the question of the appropriateness of the actions of British agencies in the context of the overall response to Mitch. Needs were mapped against DEC-funded activities, but this could not be systematically cross-referenced with the activities of other agencies and bodies in the region.

The questions and topics to be explored

The French team set out with a number of topics it wanted to explore, some of them related to key sectors of work (housing, food security and health), others to cross-cutting themes (coordination, partnerships, relief and development). In doing so, it addressed typical evaluation questions, such as the appropriateness, timeliness and technical quality of programmes, but also highlighted issues of coordination, partnership with local actors and the quality and frequency of needs assessments.

The team contracted by the DEC began with a more precisely defined list of questions, focusing on coverage and targeting; on the identification, selection and participation of beneficiaries; and on the impact and value of the programmes compared with activities undertaken by other actors. Through these questions, the DEC team, like its French counterpart, homed in on the same issues concerning sectoral programmes, and it too highlighted coordination and partnership. More formally than the French team, however, the DEC evaluation also looked at questions surrounding beneficiaries and gender and, through the so-called 'companion study' (Lister 1999), at the organisational challenges faced by British NGOs.

Accountability and learning

There are strong similarities between the findings and issues raised by the French- and British-commissioned reviews. But there appears to be a difference in emphasis in the intent of the respective review processes. The French exercise appears more geared towards learning, the British more towards accountability. The evaluation of the performance of British agencies is a more formalised process: part of the 'rules of the game' of the DEC, conducted by a team of evaluators identified through public tender, who operate against specified terms of reference, and with the final report put in the public domain. The French study was not a formal requirement, but came about as an initiative of the Groupe URD, which has a number of study and research themes that it has been exploring in various settings. There was no formal requirement to make the outcomes of this work public.

Sectoral attention points

Both evaluations draw attention to the relative weaknesses in current NGO practices, as experienced in the response to Hurricane Mitch, in the areas of health, food security and housing.

For the health sector, notwithstanding complaints and warnings about this every time a major emergency arises, inappropriate and near-expiry-date drugs continue to arrive, and are even distributed.¹⁰ A more fundamental point, however, is the need to see beyond epidemic control and first aid, and the emergency repair of health infrastructure, to the management practices of national health systems.

Where food security is concerned, in general the quickest and 'easiest' option is to provide emergency food aid. But agencies still find it difficult to move from food aid to supporting the recovery of local food production, markets and commerce. This

requires not only different inputs, but also more use of credit-based approaches, as well as an in-depth understanding of local bio-diversity, climatic conditions, farming systems and market mechanisms. Emergency personnel do not always possess this knowledge, or the patience needed to acquire it.

Housing – either constructing new homes or rebuilding damaged ones – as distinct from temporary shelter provision is a relatively new sector, certainly for most emergency- or humanitarian-oriented agencies. Both evaluations highlight the complexity of such programmes, with their legal, technical, social, economic and cultural aspects, and the lack of expertise and experience in most agencies. Inevitably, such programmes require longer project-horizons than many other relief activities. This seems to be an area where collective work on documenting experiences and good practices is urgently required.

Cross-cutting themes

Needs and capacity assessments

Contrary to what one would expect after decades of experience, the need persists to strengthen methods of assessment, and the requisite skills. Admittedly, there are 'objective' situational constraints, such as physical access, which are largely beyond the control of aid agencies. But even where agencies carry out assessments, their quality frequently could be improved. There are inter-linking levels of assessment, each with its own primary purpose: identifying priority areas within a wider affected geographical area; identifying communities or other groups of people to be prioritised within a wider priority area; identifying vulnerable households or categories of people; and identifying perceived priority needs and appropriate means of delivery/support. Enquiring about what can be supported, rather than only about what should be delivered, draws attention to local capacities, skills and resources. This is frequently overlooked.

Population movements and livelihoods

Much 'emergency' aid in response to Hurricane Mitch came at a time when, in many places, recovery was under way. Both studies identify two closely-linked issues – population movements and livelihoods – that were not always fully considered by all agencies. Often, affected people wanted to stay *in situ*, even if this meant remaining in a high-risk area, because they had a place to live and income opportunities. Elsewhere, people found themselves displaced and/or relocated, and far away or cut off from earlier income opportunities. Protecting or restoring livelihoods and income opportunities are not issues to which emergency agencies are typically

very attentive, or skilled in.¹¹ Yet intended 'beneficiaries' clearly consider them a priority.

Partnerships

Both studies highlight the value of working with local partners, and using the local knowledge and social skills they can bring. But they also show the need for agencies to strengthen local capacities to scale up, prepare their partners with disaster-response skills, and support them with technical knowledge when they become involved in new areas of work. There is a tendency to consider 'local NGOs' as the primary choice for local partnership, but although they do not explore this area in further detail, both studies highlight the potential value of local authorities. There is little documented or disseminated experience of NGOs working with local authorities like the municipality, and strengthening their capacity. This is a worthwhile area for exploration.

Coordination

A virtually constant theme in evaluations of humanitarian operations anywhere in the world is poor coordination, along with the retrospective admission that better coordination (between aid agencies, but also between agencies and local authorities) could have avoided some major problems. There appears to be little institutionalised experience of, and skill in, developing coordination mechanisms, or in clarifying their functions and objectives. There is also the common argument that the need for speed makes coordination less of a priority. Less easily admitted is the weight of institutional self-interest in aid-agency decisions. Again, this seems an area where some fresh thinking and staff guidance are required.

Political scaling-up

Emergency response takes place very much at the grass-roots, micro-level of a project. However, both evaluations draw attention to the fact that project activities, as soon as they go beyond life-saving actions, need to be understood in a wider political, economic, social and policy context. This context may be outside the control of NGOs, but it is not beyond the influence of their advocacy work, in which local organisations may be very active and skilled.

Rethinking 'disaster response'

Disaster preparedness

Many DEC agencies admit that, although they entered the region after Hurricane Fifi in 1975, they were utterly unprepared for Mitch, despite the frequency of emergencies in the region. Following Mitch, all DEC agencies are incorporating disaster

preparedness into their plans, and are considering providing training and support for their local partners. There is, however, very little coordination in this area, and many organisations are going through the same process with virtually no cross-fertilisation of ideas or resources. A number of international bodies and large networks are considering disaster preparedness from a regional perspective, and discussing the same potential measures. These include regional databases of human resources; the availability of regional emergency funds; and appropriately located stocks of emergency communications equipment, including cellular phones and radios, and rescue equipment. But disaster preparedness is notoriously difficult to maintain at a satisfactory level because institutional memories tend to be short, and other priorities compete for financial and human resources.

Rethinking 'emergency relief'

Both evaluations suggest that what is labelled 'emergency relief' can in reality be 'recovery aid'. The French team points out that immediate life-saving 'search and rescue' activities are largely undertaken by locals; most international actors arrive too late. Similarly, the British evaluation highlights the fact that much of the DEC funds, raised for 'emergency' relief, were actually used for recovery and rehabilitation work.

Both reviews strongly converge in their reflections on vulnerability and risk, and the fundamental limitations and inadequacies of emergency relief in dealing with this. Much relief may help to save lives, but this type of aid, and its providers, are not very good at helping people to regain income opportunities or restore livelihoods. Emergency aid is still less effective in addressing deep-rooted vulnerabilities, which are the product of political, economic and social processes. Implicitly, these evaluations cast doubt on the oft-heard assertion that emergency aid fills a temporary gap in order to bring things 'back to normal'. For many disaster-affected people, things may never fully get back to normal, at least not in the medium term, and are even less likely to do so without fundamental political and economic change. Poorly thought through 'aid' programmes may even hamper the recovery of families, for instance when a settlement is created without consideration of income opportunities, or when household debt is increased by a hasty shift to loan-based schemes. Only development aid can hope to reduce structural vulnerability. 'Developmental relief' requires that agencies work 'developmentally' with relief aid, which often has its own bureaucratic and procedural constraints. In

short, this is the wrong tool used for the right need. The question is why only relief aid should be flexible, and why development aid (that is, aid from development budgets) cannot be provided in quicker and more flexible ways.

Relief and development ‘side by side’: the contiguum

DEC agencies and their local partners sometimes differed over whether to put existing development programmes on hold in order to concentrate entirely on the emergency. In the acute phase, almost all efforts were concentrated on the response to Mitch. After a few months, many agencies, especially outside Honduras where destruction was less widespread, gradually restarted work on their previous programmes.

Agencies were frequently unable to combine the expertise and skills found within the emergency and regional departments. In some cases, little input from the emergency department reached country or field level; some local partner organisations reported receiving no emergency advice at all. This can be attributed partly to a lack of Latin American experience and relevant language skills within emergency departments, and also to the perceived differences between emergency and development perspectives. Both of these factors made regional departments unwilling to ask for specific advice, and emergency departments reluctant to provide it. In other cases, emergency departments failed to take regional knowledge into account in their actions.

The French team recommends including staff with development skills and expertise in crisis-response teams, once the actions go beyond ‘search and rescue’. This should not await the start of ‘recovery’ and ‘rehabilitation’ programmes; such people have an important contribution to make in the assessment and planning phase.

The apparent tension between emergency and development programmes reflects how the international aid system is organised institutionally, financially and in terms of skill profiles. Fundamentally, usually unstated paradigms profoundly affect analysis of the problem, and responses to it. Yet there are alternatives to the ‘classical’ view (see Table 3).

The roles of a donor

Both reviews point to the negative implications of the short timeframes set by donors for spending emergency funds on what are mostly post-emergency recovery activities. Although the DEC’s six-month expenditure marker was not a rigid deadline, as funds were available for reallocation after

this period, agencies lost their automatic right to a share of these funds after that period. This increased pressure in the field, which led to poor planning and purchasing decisions.

Although agencies had other sources of money, the unexpectedly large response to the Mitch appeal meant that DEC funds constituted a significant proportion of most agencies’ funding in the first six months. A frequently-mentioned constraint on agency’s planning was the lack of timely information on appeal sums, sometimes due to poor communication between headquarters and the field office, but partially also due to the nature of the DEC system. Some agencies reported being informed of a virtual doubling of their budget in March, others were told of large sums that had to be spent shortly before the May ‘deadline’, and others were informed after the ‘deadline’ of money that had been available. A six-month period is more suited to emergency relief operations than to activities geared towards rehabilitation and restoring livelihoods, but in this case the flexibility of the donors allowed agencies to stretch the limits and move quickly into ‘recovery’ and ‘rehabilitation’ support.

The nature, timing and frequency of reports to donors can put extra strain on people working in the field. Yet limited and non-standardised reporting makes it difficult for evaluators to make comparisons between agencies undertaking similar activities. Since the basic work must be done by field-based staff, they need clear instructions and support well ahead of the reporting time. Field staff from some agencies expressed a desire for a stronger insistence by donors on inter-agency coordination, and greater efforts to facilitate it, for example by bringing together and circulating the planning documents of different agencies. Lastly, it was suggested that platforms for fundraising through public appeals could play a more active role in public education about the need, not just for emergency work, but also for rehabilitation, for which there is frequently less money.

It might be worthwhile for NGOs linked to the DEC, the Fondation de France, the Chaîne du Bonheur and other such ‘fundraising platforms’ to meet and exchange experiences and views on how they function, and on their roles and responsibilities.

Learning from experience

Building on previous experience is crucial. Although there are contextual specifics, general lessons from the reviews of the response to Hurricane Mitch can be applied in other situations.

By itself, carrying out reviews and evaluations does not constitute learning. It is important that the lessons

Table 3: Disaster response: alternatives to current views¹²

'Classical' view	Alternative view
A disaster is a natural event	A disaster is a natural event, the impact of which is determined by the structural conditions of the affected society. Most of the victims are poor
We need to bring material assistance and basic services to the victims	The people affected have their own strengths and capacities to respond
Governments and NGOs have to organise to provide these basic services	Affected populations must reorganise to define their needs, establish services, coordinate with aid providers and negotiate with outside actors around appropriate assistance, and its control
The emphasis is on the short term, and the distribution of material assistance	Planning is not only for the short term, but also for the medium and long, taking into consideration the need for relocation, economic rehabilitation, social and psychological recovery, reform and sustainable development
Aid providers concentrate on problems, needs and weaknesses	Aid providers see problems and needs, but also take into account the capacities of local people, and opportunities to reinforce them
The assessment and analysis are carried out by experts, who are 'objective'	The assessment and analysis are carried out jointly by groups of people and by specialists, who collaborate to ensure that recommendations are being implemented
External interveners try to shape local organisations in their image	Local organisations are seen as a legitimate mobilisation of local people to respond to their own problems
The organisations of the affected population might cause political problems	The organisations of the affected population can and must have a say in, and influence over, reconstruction
Reconstruction is a 'return to normal', with the restoration of basic services an important indicator that the objective has been achieved	Reconstruction is an opportunity for reform, to create new forms of life, work and organisation, giving people greater dignity and voice

identified are disseminated and incorporated into the training of staff and managers. Again, there is much scope for, and potential benefit to be had from, inter-agency collaboration, both at headquarters and at field level. All agencies and counterpart organisations report being stronger now as a result of their Mitch experience. Organisations are working in new sectors and in new geographical areas, and many local organisations feel that they have gained greater credibility with national and international bodies, and with the communities they serve.

At headquarters level, the French team recommends that a forum similar to Task Force Mitch be used in future, to bring together governments, funders and NGOs, and strengthen liaison between them. As an inter-agency platform, the Groupe URD and its members are potentially in a better position to

continue referring to the Hurricane Mitch evaluation, whereas once their final report was delivered, the DEC consultants left the task of organisational learning to individual DEC members.

For workers in the field, the Mitch reviews and others all point to the need for a 'coordination and evaluation support unit', a 'strategic monitoring unit' or a 'learning office', with staff that can stand back from the day-to-day detail, maintain a broader perspective, monitor and analyse developments, draw attention to issues that appear to be overlooked and to linkages that should be made, and make available their knowledge and expertise. This carries a cost, but one which is dwarfed by the costs of repeated learning by trial and error. Such avoidable costs may not show up in the accounts of aid agencies and their donors, but they can be all too real for the people they had come to help.

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Notes

- ¹ There is confusion between ‘damage assessment’ and ‘needs assessment’. Although closely linked, they are not the same, and require different assessment techniques. ‘Damage assessment’ relates to the damage inflicted on physical infrastructure, and the economic losses resulting from damage to productive capacity, capital assets and stocks. ‘Needs assessment’ relates to the requirements of individuals and groups. These may be more immediate, and may evolve more rapidly.
- ² See ‘Reform of the French Aid Administration’, *RRN Newsletter 14*, June 1999, p. 13.
- ³ Groupe URD carries out research, training and evaluation, as well as lobbying activities. For more information, see ‘Groupe Urgence, Réhabilitation, Développement’, *ibid.*, p. 15.
- ⁴ On the 1995–96 review and reform process and the relaunch of the ‘new’ DEC, see John Borton, ‘A “New” Disasters Emergency Committee’, *RRN Newsletter 8*, May 1997, p. 12.
- ⁵ Abraham de Kock, ‘WFP Response to Hurricane Mitch: A New Approach’, *RRN Newsletter 16*, March 2000, p. 12.
- ⁶ Thalia Kidder, ‘The Role of Savings and Remittances in Unstable Situations: Reflections after Hurricane Mitch’, *RRN Newsletter 14*, June 1999, p. 7.
- ⁷ Swiss Disaster Relief, the operational branch of the Swiss Federal Humanitarian Aid department, provided immediate ‘search and rescue’ help. However, its main ‘emergency response’ programme, like many others, was not designed and resourced until early 1999, some two months after the hurricane.
- ⁸ Peter Uvin, ‘Fighting Hunger at the Grassroots: Paths to Scaling-Up’, *World Development*, vol. 23, no. 6, pp. 927–39.
- ⁹ ‘Central America 15 Months On: Reconstruction But No Transformation’, *RRN Newsletter 16*, March 2000, pp. 9–11.
- ¹⁰ See, for example, Pharmaciens sans Frontières, <www.psf-pharm.org>.
- ¹¹ Swiss Disaster Relief, for example, gave its humanitarian programme a two-year time horizon, but even by mid-2000, more than 18 months after Mitch, support for income-generating activities constituted a minor percentage of its total expenditure, most of which had gone on infrastructure repairs and relief donations.
- ¹² Tom Lent, Diana Garcia, Rogelio Gomez-Hermosillo and Oscar Jara, *Paradigmas ante Situaciones de Emergencia*, 1998.

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HUMANITARIAN PRACTICE NETWORK

Background

The **Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN)** is the new name for the Relief and Rehabilitation Network (RRN). It was launched in 1994 in response to research that indicated substantial gaps between practitioners and policy makers in the humanitarian field, as well as serious weaknesses in the ability of the sector to learn and become more 'knowledge-based'.

Purpose

To stimulate critical analysis, advance the professional learning and development of those engaged in and around humanitarian action, and improve practice.

Objectives

To provide relevant and useable analysis and guidance for humanitarian practice, as well as summary information on relevant policy and institutional developments in the humanitarian sector.

Activities

- **Publishing in three formats:** Good Practice Reviews (one per year), Network Papers (four to six per year) and *Humanitarian Exchange* (two per year). All materials are produced in English and French.
- **Operating a resource website:** this is one of the key reference sites for humanitarian actors.
- **Collaborating with international 'partner' networks:** this increases the reach of the **HPN**, and brings mutual benefit to the participating networks.
- **Holding occasional seminars on topical issues:** these bring together practitioners, policy-makers and analysts.

HPN Target Audience

Individuals and organisations actively engaged in humanitarian action. Also those involved in the improvement of performance at international, national and local level – in particular mid-level operational managers, staff in policy departments, and trainers.

While a project and Network with its own identity, the **HPN** exists within the Humanitarian Policy Group at the ODI. This not only ensures extended networking and dissemination opportunities, but also positions the **HPN** in a wider 'centre of excellence' which enhances the impact of the **HPN's** work.

Funding

The **HPN's** third project period began in April 2000. The **HPN** is currently supported by DfID, DANIDA, SIDA and USAID/OFDA.