

outcome HIGHLIGHTS

La Paz, Bolivia: 70% of the city's surface area consists of landslide-prone slopes, imperilling the lives and the homes of about half a million people.



Photo: Eva Maria Heim

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Risk management in Bolivia

Raising awareness and supporting prevention-oriented solutions

In brief

- Despite the threat of natural disasters, adequate risk management policies are rare at the local level in Bolivia
- NCCR North-South researchers tested a bottom-up, participatory approach to risk assessment and management in local communities
- The vulnerability mapping strategy and resilience study featured here prompted municipal policy changes in Bolivia and garnered international attention



Research featured here was conducted in Bolivia

Natural disaster risks

Many Bolivians face high levels of risk from natural disasters like floods, earthquakes, and droughts. The threats and potential consequences vary greatly by region. In rural areas, natural disasters endanger crops and livestock, and therefore food security. In cities, rapid migration from rural areas has produced settlements in places susceptible to floods and landslides.

According to NCCR North-South research, local efforts to manage these risks are frequently insufficient. Though national laws on risk management exist, these “top-down” policies often fail to have an effect among municipal authorities and communities. And those communities that have risk management strategies in place often overlook critical measures of risk prevention or reduction, opting instead to focus on emergency response capabilities.

Mapping vulnerability

Working together with well-established local partners in Bolivia, the NCCR North-South launched a PAMS project (see back) in 2007 to raise community awareness and spur

improved risk management from the bottom up. Project leaders took advantage of Bolivia’s existing Law of Popular Participation (LPP) stipulating that registered community-based organisations may create municipal development plans.

There were two parts to the project: one focused on rural communities, the other on urban communities.

In the first part, strategies for risk management were developed in six rural communities in the Departments of Cochabamba, Santa Cruz, and Beni. Together with residents, workshops were organised to create “vulnerability maps” illustrating the most important threats, risks, and vulnerable areas in each community. In addition, Emergency Operation Centres and contingency plans were established for each municipality, to coordinate the efforts of local and national authorities, armed forces, firefighters, and health services in the event of an emergency.

In the second part, a resilience study was developed with residents and conducted in the city of La Paz, focusing on six neighbourhoods affected

Residents helped create vulnerability maps showing threats and areas most at risk in their communities.



Photo: FUNDEPCO

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by landslides and floods. Residents were surveyed about the factors that enable them to overcome natural disasters and similar emergencies.

Insights prompt action

Both parts of the project helped local authorities and residents identify areas particularly susceptible to natural disasters and encouraged them to find solutions. Residents especially realised that more could be done before disaster strikes in order to prevent catastrophe or minimise harm. This new awareness empowers residents to invest more in their own safety and leaves them better equipped to negotiate with municipal authorities about improving local standards of risk management.

Tangible progress was made among municipal authorities. Two separate municipalities – rural San Javier and urban La Paz – changed their official Municipal Development Plan to incorporate risk management. Policy changes like these enable increased funding of risk management, placing it alongside overarching themes like health and education as a far-reaching, long-term priority of municipal planners and developers.

Advancing risk management

The PAMS project was successful for several reasons. First, it centred

on an urgent problem. Second, its democratic, highly participatory approach – uniting municipal authorities, trusted NGOs, community leaders, and residents – raised awareness and support at all levels, while generating solutions consistent with on-the-ground reality. Third, project leaders paid careful attention to the legal and political context, making use of existing laws and selecting municipalities with stable leadership and openness to collaboration.

The benefits of the project are set to continue. Thanks to local media attention, project implementers were invited to 18 more municipalities in Bolivia to conduct workshops on risk management. Using the individual vulnerability maps, NCCR North-South researchers created an atlas of “threats, vulnerabilities and risks in Bolivia” that has proved essential to national ministries, donors, and development agencies looking to sustainably improve risk management. The methodology used to create the atlas was also presented at UNICEF-Bolivia. Further, the resilience study was presented at the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction and nominated for an award by the Andean Commission for Disaster Prevention and Supply. Finally, OXFAM International is financing continuation of the project.

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- Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute
- Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies
- Centro de Investigación para el Desarrollo (CIDES)

Partners in Bolivia

- Fundación La Paz
- Fundación para el Desarrollo Participativo Comunitario (FUNDEPCO)
- OXFAM International

Further reading

Quiroga Becerra de la Roca R, Salamanca L, Espinoza J, Torrico G. 2008. Atlas de vulnerabilidades de los municipios de Bolivia. La Paz, Bolivia: NCCR North-South, Oxfam, IHEID [The Graduate Institute, Geneva], STI [Swiss Tropical Institute].

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Outcome Highlights feature effective collaborations between researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and local communities in the NCCR North-South network.

Partnership Actions for Mitigating Syndromes (PAMS)

are pilot projects designed to test NCCR North-South research in real-world settings. Developed jointly by researchers and local stakeholders, they aim to promote mutual learning and reveal paths to sustainability.

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