Executive summary

‘Doble afectación’

Living with disasters and conflict in Colombia

Ayesha Siddiqi, Katie Peters and Julia Zulver

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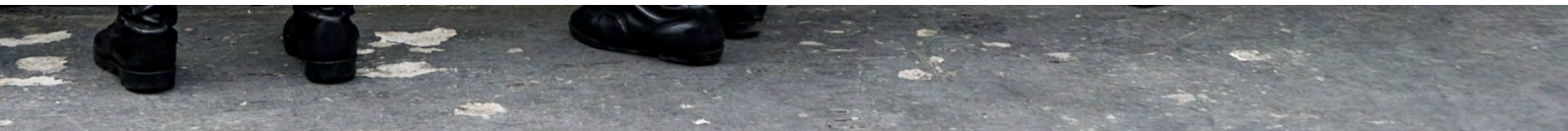

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Cover photo: Army unit stationed in Comuna 13, the most dangerous district in Medellín, Colombia. © Lianne Milton/Panos.

About this paper

This report is part of the project 'When disasters and conflict collide: uncovering the truth', a collaboration between the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI). The lead researcher is Katie Peters, Senior Research Fellow, ODI (**k.peters@odi.org.uk**).

Available in this series

Peters, K. (2018) *Accelerating Sendai Framework implementation in Asia: disaster risk reduction in contexts of violence, conflict and fragility*. London: ODI (www.odi.org/publications/11153-accelerating-sendai-framework-implementation-asia-disaster-risk-reduction-contexts-violence-conflict)

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Peters, K. (2019) *Disaster risk reduction in conflict contexts: an agenda for action*. London: ODI (www.odi.org/publications/11408-disaster-risk-reduction-conflict-contexts-agenda-action)

Multimedia content

- Online feature including videos from Colombia, Lebanon, and Special Representative of the UN Secretary General for Disaster Risk Reduction, Ms Mami Mizutori (www.odi.org/disasters-conflict)
- Podcast series: *When disasters and conflict collide* (www.odi.org/opinion/10507-podcast-series-when-disasters-and-conflict-collide)
  - Episode 1: *Conflict: the elephant in the diplomatic meeting room*
  - Episode 2: *The politics of disasters*
  - Episode 3: *A call to action*

All reports and content as well as information on the project can be found online: www.odi.org/projects/2913-when-disasters-and-conflict-collide-uncovering-truth

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Executive summary

Colombia is considered one of the most advanced countries in Latin America for disaster risk reduction (DRR). Decades of state engagement in large-scale disasters has generated a relatively mature legal and institutional framework governing disaster response and risk reduction, developed over the past 20–30 years. However, the country also has a long history of conflict, involving targeted killings, generalised violence, kidnapping and extortion. Despite a recent peace process, violence continues.

As in many other parts of the world, Colombia's current DRR policy and practice fail to take adequate account of the conflict situation. As a result, large numbers of conflict-displaced people (an estimated 15% of the country's population is internally displaced) are highly vulnerable, with scant protection against the devastating effects of disasters. Colombia's conflict-affected poor are forced to live in locations that increase their exposure to natural hazards.

This case study sheds light on why disaster risk is so high in Colombia, and how disasters and conflict interact to increase vulnerability. In addition to exploring the current national institutional and policy frameworks for DRR, it includes a critical analysis of two recent disasters: a landslide in the Mocoa area in 2017 and the structural failure of a dam resulting in severe flooding of the Cauca River in 2018.

The findings highlight the complex and inherently political nature of DRR efforts in a context of conflict, protracted displacement and troubled state–society relations. The study highlights the need for an approach that goes beyond technocratic solutions; the reality that there are competing visions for DRR in conflict situations; and the fundamental necessity of rebuilding the social contract and recognising the rights and voices of affected citizens.

The double impacts of disasters and conflict

Colombia is one of the most hazard-prone countries in Latin America, exposed to cyclones, coastal and river flooding, earthquakes, landslides and volcanic activity. Millions of people are displaced due to violence and conflict, and levels of poverty and income inequality are high. Families often have no other option than to live in high-risk areas. The situation is referred to locally as 'doble afectación' or 'doubly affected'. Since 2012, victims of violence can apply to a dedicated government body – Unidad para la Atencíon y Reparación Integral a las Víctimas (UARIV), known as the 'Victims' Unit' – for financial compensation and other benefits, but progress in delivering support has been slow.

Against this background, the government has made significant strides over the years in implementing more effective disaster risk management frameworks, including dedicating a national institution, the Unidad Nacional para la Gestion del Riesgo en Desastres (National Disaster Risk Management Unit) (UNGRD), to that purpose. Even so, for a range of reasons, major disaster events still exceed the national capacity to respond. One of the main factors hampering effective DRR is that current approaches to disaster and conflict risk are disconnected, with UARIV and UNGRD operating independently of each other. One consequence is institutional neglect of conflict as the context in which DRR ambitions are pursued. Lack of funding, corruption and insufficient decentralisation of resources also hamper effective DRR. Solutions generally lack community engagement, tend to rely on external technical experts and offer infrastructure solutions, rather than building local capacity. All of these factors combine to perpetuate a predominantly 'top-down' approach to risk reduction.

Opposing visions and an 'uncaring' state

The 2018 Cauca floods were the result of structural failures during the construction of a hydropower dam, widely touted as Colombia's largest infrastructure project. The event highlights many of the complexities associated with a technological or man-made disaster, and its politicisation. First, because it was not caused by a natural hazard, and there were vested political and private interests, the government refused to classify it as a disaster. Second, the state was unwilling or unable to categorise affected communities correctly, effectively preventing many people from accessing relief. Third, limited efforts were made to define responsibilities for risk reduction and post-disaster response for such an event, which was considered outside the remit of UNGRD because it was not a natural hazard. This effectively privatised responsibility to the company building the dam, yet the government failed to hold the company accountable for compensation or further risk reduction efforts. The lack of an effective response exacerbated community feelings of marginalisation and further undermined already fragile levels of trust in the government.

The 2017 landslide in Mocoa was caused by heavy rainfall coupled with erosion and lack of vegetation on the surrounding slopes. It left more than 300 people dead, injured or missing, with thousands more losing their homes. Most of the internally displaced and indigenous groups living in Mocoa were left out of disaster preparation activities, and their participation in rehabilitation planning has also been very limited. Some officials even maintained that these groups had no rights since they 'chose' to live in a hazard-prone area. In the aftermath of the landslide, many simply returned to the same dangerous locations, while others resettled in areas they considered to be at higher risk from future landslides.

Both disasters illustrate that, while there has been a shift in political thinking to prioritise risk reduction, inadequate prevention and mitigation measures and conflicting visions of DRR between the state and affected citizens hamper efforts to build disaster resilience, as well as doing little to repair already fractured state–citizen relations. State policies that result in dispossession or displacement – a factor in both examples – only reinforce the perception of an 'uncaring' state. Top-down institutional support also contributes to this belief.

Another aspect highlighted by both events is the importance of rights and voice and the need to groundtruth visions of DRR, especially in a country with a history of state violence against its citizens. This calls for a change in mindset away from a culture of expert-led planning and towards meaningful and genuinely 'bottom-up' dialogue that empowers citizens with the knowledge and skills they need to build more resilient livelihoods.

Recommendations

The Colombia case highlights the close interactions between disasters and conflict, and their effects on people's lives and livelihoods. When the legal and institutional frameworks for dealing with disasters and conflict are compartmentalised, insufficient attention is likely to be paid to the ways in which vulnerabilities are linked. Addressing this does not warrant convergence of these frameworks – that would be legally problematic in Colombia – but it does require due recognition of linked vulnerabilities and impacts in order to better design and deliver DRR in conflict contexts. New challenges arising from the demobilisation of armed groups and the crisis in neighbouring Venezuela are only reinforcing the impetus to find more effective solutions. With each disaster affecting citizens differently, including in terms of their perceptions of the state, there is a need for nuanced and thorough consideration of conflict dynamics in the design and delivery of DRR. Urgent action is required to deepen knowledge and understanding of the disaster–conflict interface.

The lessons from this study yield useful recommendations for strengthening the institutional regimes dealing with 'doubly affected' citizens, both in Colombia and elsewhere.

Adopt a more community-based vision of DRR

A legally mandated and robust system for local consultation would enable a more integrated approach to DRR that addresses people's demands for social justice and helps repair state–society relations.

Improve coordination among agencies and across scales

There is an urgent need to improve coordination between UARIV and UNGRD to foster the design and delivery of disaster response and DRR for 'doubly affected' communities. This includes working out how to overcome existing challenges and avoid exacerbating mistrust between citizens and the state.

Establish clear legal responsibility for DRR relating to man-made disasters

The Cauca floods demonstrate clearly that privatising responsibility does not work. On the contrary, there is a danger that the current approach will deepen the divide between people and the state and further entrench the strongly held beliefs that are undermining the social contract. There is therefore a need for more robust and punitive laws to safeguard citizens from such disasters.

Strengthen the underlying social contract and build trust

Enshrining the rights and entitlements of citizens in law is a critical foundation for dealing with disasters in areas affected by armed conflict and insecurity. This requires a more consultative, transparent and equitable DRR process that addresses people's basic human rights, including protection from violence and disasters. Equally, better access to disaster relief (achieved by addressing current classifications and removing the need to demonstrate that people are in danger or deserve to receive support) will not only benefit people directly, it will also help build trust and restore faith in the state.

The evolution of disaster risk reduction in Colombia

Selected key policy moments, events and legislation

1948
Assassination of popularist political leader and ensuing revolt which left Bogota in ruins prompted the introduction of the Red Cross in Colombia to respond to the crisis.

1960
Creation of Civil Defence – aided by USAID support – to respond to 'accidental or non-human origin disasters to prevent social and political instability' (Zeiderman, 2012).

1979
Colombia Pacific Coast tsunami in Tumaco. The government created a Disaster Response System and established local to national disaster management institutions for disaster preparedness and management.

1983
Civil Defence responded to the Popayan mega disaster – a volcanic eruption triggering an avalanche and earthquakes.

1985
Nevado del Ruiz volcano and guerrilla siege of the Palace of Justice in Bogotá marked a legal, political and moral shift by the Colombian state towards 'anticipatory logics of risk management' (Zeiderman, 2012).

1986
National Office of Emergency Response created with support from UNDP.

1988
Government of Colombia created the National Disaster Preparedness and Response System (SNPAD), indicating a broader approach to DRM. The SNPAD was responsible for disaster prevention and management across the country, bringing together public and private institutions. This also marked the separation of natural and anthropogenic disasters from those related to conflict.

1999
Following the Armenia earthquake, the government began to more systematically record disaster impacts data.

1999 National Plan for Disaster Prevention and Response (PNPAD) or Conpes 3146 established, promoting comprehensive risk reduction with an emphasis on decentralised risk management responsibilities at subnational level.

Government of Colombia begins ongoing collaboration with the World Bank, which provides financial and technical support to a range of DRR initiatives including probabilistic risk modelling, infrastructure, capacity analysis and innovative financial mechanisms.

2005
Colombia endorsed the Hyogo Framework for Action on Disaster Risk Reduction.

2010–2011
La Niña-related flooding across the country lasted for 10 months, with significant impacts on the population and economy. As part of the National Calamity Fund, Humanitarian Colombia was established to administer response and rehabilitation funds (Campos et al., 2011).

2011
Law 4147 aimed to improve efforts to coordinate disaster mechanisms by establishing the Unidad Nacional para la Gestión del Riesgo de Desastres (UNGRD).

2012
The SNPAD was replaced with the National Disaster Risk Management System (SNGRD).

Law 1523 was passed, adopting a new national DRR policy and establishing a national system for managing disaster risk.

Colombia submitted a Hyogo Framework progress report for the period 2011–2012 (Government of Colombia, 2012).

2014
The 2014 National Policy for Disaster Risk Management implemented in part through the National Development Plan 2014–2018 – with fiscal risk management a priority, alongside reducing loss of life, asset exposure, financial rehabilitation and reconstruction.

Colombia submitted a Hyogo Framework progress report for the period 2013–2014 (Government of Colombia, 2014a).

2015
Colombia endorsed the Sendai Framework for Action on Disaster Risk Reduction.

Colombia launched its Plan Nacional de Gestión del Riesgo de Desastres 2015–2025 (Government of Colombia, 2015b), to be delivered by the UNGRD.

2017
Colombia participated in the 2017 Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction, and undertook a Sendai Framework Readiness Review (Government of Colombia, 2017).

2018
Hosted in Colombia, President Santos opened the 6th Regional Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction in the Americas and 3rd High-level Meeting of Ministers and Authorities on the Implementation of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 in the Americas and the Caribbean.

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203 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8NJ

+44 (0)20 7922 0300
info@odi.org

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