Nicaragua has a long and painful history of sudden-onset disasters precipitated by natural phenomena, which have devastated lives, particularly those of the poor and most vulnerable, and suffocated the country’s economic and human development. Poverty is widespread, with 46 percent of the population living below the poverty line. Only Haiti is poorer in Latin America.

According to the World Bank, Nicaragua is one of the world’s most disaster-prone countries; in past decade, over 1.35 million people have been displaced or affected by disasters; over 3,500 killed; and between US$1.5 and US$3 billion in damage sustained; Hurricane Felix struck 4 September 2007, principally affecting the Región Autónoma del Atlántico Norte (RAAN), the North Atlantic Autonomous Region; 60 percent the RAAN’s population lives below the poverty line, higher than the national average; Felix affected 34,000 households (approximately 200,000 persons), caused 235 deaths, destroyed 10,000 houses, and tore roofs from additional 9,000 homes and buildings; Over 86,000 hectares of land damaged; more than 6,000 livestock killed; monthly food aid requirements calculated at US$3.2 million.

The humanitarian response

• The Nicaraguan government estimated recovery needs at US$400 million US$292 million requested through UN, UN Flash Appeal requested almost US$40 million;• Largest humanitarian donors: EC/ECHO (US$8.2 million, 26.8 percent of total); U.S. (US$7 million, 22.7 percent); Sweden (US$1.5 million, 4.9 percent); CERF provided US$5 million (16.2 percent); earmarked funds from other UN agencies (US$2.7 million, 8.7 percent);• US$7.5 million more provided in response to heavy rains following hurricane; 55.8 percent from Canada, 22.1 percent from Switzerland, 17.5 percent from EC/ECHO;• Venezuela in-kind support and cash aid surpassed US$18 million.


The crisis: Felix and the marginalised North Atlantic region

Nicaragua
Living in the Eye of the Storm
SILVIA HIDALGO, Director, DARA

Just as many humanitarian and regional actors were preparing initiatives to mark the 10th anniversary of the catastrophe caused by Hurricane Mitch, Nicaragua was once again struck by a hurricane. This time, Hurricane Felix affected principally the most marginalised and neglected Miskito people of the country’s most vulnerable north-east Atlantic coast region.
The humanitarian response: An uneven relief effort

The effectiveness of the humanitarian response was uneven, and depended greatly on both the location and accessibility of communities and the presence and capacity of local organisations and actors. Crucially important was the fact that many international organisations were either not on the ground or lacked sufficient capacity because the storm was initially expected to have the greatest impact on neighbouring Honduras.

The head of the Sistema Nacional para la Prevención, Mitigación y Atención de Desastres (SINAPRED), the national body for disaster prevention and response, quickly recognised the challenge posed by the extensive humanitarian needs, aggravated by the heavy rains which followed Felix. Nevertheless, even the initial basic needs concerning food and shelter were, according to SINAPRED, underestimated. The response action plan was subsequently estimated at US$400 million, of which US$292 million was requested through the United Nations by President Ortega. The UN Flash Appeal, issued 10 days after the hurricane, requested almost US$40 million.

The initial response was hampered because many international and regional teams were prepositioned in Honduras, where the hurricane was expected to hit. For example, the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) had no teams in Nicaragua. Therefore, while local organisations and NGOs were not present, coverage was very poor. Moreover, as in other disasters, there were disheartening examples of avoidable failures in the delivery of aid, in one such instance, water trucks were sent to distant communities, but were forced to return because there were no containers in which to store the water. Nevertheless, while there were many complaints reported in the national and local press, many external observers described the initial response as acceptable.

The disaster response was managed by SINAPRED, with efforts by OCHA to enhance coordination and introduce sectoral clusters which would provide for greater transparency in aid prioritisation. However, the international humanitarian community is still uncertain regarding the applicability of international coordination systems, such as the cluster approach, in countries where the national government takes the lead during a humanitarian crisis.

Despite the national and international response, beneficiaries often poorly informed about recovery plans and aid activities, and consequently had little ownership of the programmes implemented. For example, three months after the storm, community leaders in Sandy Bay were unsure whether they would receive aid. In hard-to-access areas, where communities carried out recovery activities with their own means, local appeals for expertise on how to apply disaster risk reduction standards in the rehabilitation of housing and public buildings often went unheeded.

Needs assessments did not clearly differentiate between pre-existing conditions, life-threatening situations, and beneficiary priorities. At the household level, there were many areas that were left untouched and limited, making targeting the most vulnerable within communities difficult. This was exacerbated by the fact that in the local culture, people were accustomed to sharing resources irrespective of differences in living conditions or means. Therefore, allocating aid on a per-household basis meant that relief did not necessarily reach those most in need. In other instances, some in-kind assistance was distributed based on the criterion of whether a family member had lost their home, hence, not according to a specific assessment of needs.

Several factors came into play in the preparedness, relief and recovery operations. As in other scenarios, the magnitude of the disaster was determined not only by the hurricane’s intensity, but by the pattern of vulnerability of the people living in the area. The effectiveness of interventions was also conditioned by factors specific to the context and circumstances. Overall, four issues stand out:

Imperfect early warning and preparedness

Since the hurricane was initially expected to make landfall in Honduras, villagers in the RAAN received insufficient warning from officials. More significantly, many international emergency teams were not deployed in Nicaragua, but were instead dispatched to Honduras. These failures were due not only to the shortcomings of the computer models used to predict the storm, but also to the fact that Felix developed strength in record time. US meteorologists claimed that Felix “strengthened more rapidly than any other storm on record, anywhere in the world.” Furthermore, although local authorities in the region did visit communities to warn them of the imminent storm and alerted many fishermen, there was an institutional fear of “crying wolf,” stemming from their experience of the contrast between the alarm raised in the RAAN in 2005 regarding hurricane Beta and the limited damage which actually resulted.

While the RAAN is considered disaster prone and has benefited from earlier disaster preparedness and prevention efforts – implemented mainly by the Dutch Red Cross, Grupo Voluntario Civil, and Oxfam through Acción Médica Cristiano – local people were not sufficiently disaster aware. Sunshine and good weather was deceptive, leading the population to believe that there was no imminent danger. The affected communities claimed that they first learned of the danger and emergency decisions were not taken, for example, to close schools.

An isolated and culturally distinct region

While all concerned in the response were, in theory, clear that the area’s cultural and linguistic differences required locally owned and adapted, and understood, the response was different from the national and regional press. Many claimed that, despite warnings, many emergency decisions were not taken, for example, to close schools.

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Autonomous Region. This low-lying area is home to thousands of Miskito Indians, who depend on canoes to navigate shallow waters and lakes to reach higher ground. Before making landfall, Felix had devastated the Coyote Miskitos, a fishing area crucial to the local economy. After battering the coastal communities, the hurricane headed inland in a south-westerly direction, across a sparsely populated area, leaving a trail of destruction some 60 km wide. The RAAN is the largest and poorest region of Nicaragua, 60 percent of whose 308,000 inhabitants live below the poverty line – a much higher proportion than the national average. They are ethnically distinct from the rest of the population and enjoy a significant degree of political autonomy. Most of the rural communities affected by Hurricane Felix were home to Miskito Indians.

According to official estimates, Hurricane Felix directly affected close to 34,000 households (approximately 200,000 persons), and caused 235 deaths, with a further 133 persons still missing as of November 2007. Over 10,000 houses were completely destroyed by the hurricane, which tore the roofs from an additional 9,000 homes. Over US$4 million was required to cover temporary shelter requirements, under a plan presented by the government through UNDP. Over 273,000 corrugated zinc roofs were needed, at an average cost of US$15 each. Hundreds of public buildings and utilities, including schools, clinics, and water sources, were also damaged or destroyed.

In addition, monthly food aid requirements were calculated at US$32 million, in part because the hurricane disrupted the harvesting of several key crops. Over 86,000 hectares of land were damaged and over 6,000 livestock killed. However, the World Food Programme (WFP) did not receive sufficient funding to cover all food needs for the 200,000 beneficiaries estimated by the government. In practice, WFP focused on covering 60 percent of the food aid requirements of 88,400 people. Small-scale fishing, officially the primary source of income for coastal communities, was also seriously disrupted due to the displacement of the fisherman, the loss of equipment, and the extensive destruction of their homes.

While in most areas there were no possibilities to evacuate the population prior to the storm, after Felix was over, 12,700 people were evacuated to 72 camps, 65 of which were located in the regional capital Puerto Cabezas. However, the city was without electrical power and communications, and the airport runway and many roads were unusable, making impossible the first planes carrying humanitarian aid to land.

By the end of October, the Nicaraguan government estimated humanitarian and recovery needs at US$400 million. Although Hurricane Felix was a relatively small-scale catastrophe in terms of the number of victims and destruction caused, it must be seen in the context of disasters which are recurrent and which disproportionately affect the most vulnerable. It is in such situations that the concept of donor engagement to pre- vent and prepare for disaster has special meaning. In the wake of Hurricane Mitch, Nicaragua had embarked on a process of strengthening its capacity to deal with repeated disasters. In this respect, the country’s efforts benefited from the aid related to post-Mitch recovery operations and more recent international assistance strategies. Nevertheless, preparations to respond to Felix were flawed.

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experience in disaster management in the RAAN all affected the response.

Institutional decentralisation often made it unclear at what level responsibilities lay. In practice, the Governor of the RAAN lacked the necessary capacity to manage the response and required support. Even when the international community tried to respect local capacity and promote locally owned responses, it is often difficult to know which level of authority should be supported, especially in view of the region’s autonomy and decentralisation. It is unclear, therefore, what exactly “local” means.

Politicalization in Nicaragua

Unsurprisingly given its history, Nicaragua remains politically polarised, despite recent right-left party coalitions. While humanitarian action is meant to be impartial and non-political, politicians, particularly sudden ones, provide opportunities for political grandstanding and chenitism. For example, considerable visibility was given to the humanitarian support provided by Hugo Chávez’s Venezuela, because of his government’s close relationship with that of Nicaragua’s President, Daniel Ortega. The government also argued that it had no funds with which to respond to either existing or new needs, given the constraints of its budget, debt repayment requirements, and the conditionality imposed by the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and many traditional donors.

The new coalition government led by President Obiang and his party’s candidates in elections to prioritize in the RAAN, and the region’s voters duly helped elect the Sandinista candidate. However, in the wake of Hurricane Felix, there was considerable disengagement amongst many inhabitants of the RAAN, who regrettably having voted for President Ortega, and making the accusation that “those who had wanted to become in positions of power now wanted to become millionaires and benefit from the situation of the disaster.”

Many small and mainly religious, organizations traveled to the area to implement rehabilitation activities – such as rebuilding homes, and providing humanitarian aid. The impact of Hurricane Felix was not a large disaster in terms of its impact or the level of funding directed towards the response; yet, an analysis of the response to disasters such as Hurricane Felix provides an opportunity to assess disaster risk reduction efforts and how they can influence and improve emergency humanitarian responses. Such an assessment should include all dimensions of local capacity and how prior support has

While in previous large disasters some members of the international donor community have advocated “turning disaster into opportunity” or “building back better,” certain donors, especially those that focus on relief activities such as CERF, put limits on the type of recovery assistance they provide. For example, at times the parameters of the primary emergency funding for water and sanitation did not allow for continuous monitoring and renewed assessment, which would have contributed to better understanding of the unfolding context and therefore aid appropriateness. Furthermore, communication with beneficiary communities is essential, so that assistance can be adjusted to meet their changing needs and the resulting response strategies can be shaped by the priorities and concerns of the survivors. These concerns – and the shift from relief to recovery – should be captured in a follow-up needs assessment in this context.

The international donor response: Scarcity of actors — but Venezuela

According to OCHA’s Financial Tracking Service (FTS), the largest humanitarian aid donors for the response to Hurricane Felix were: the European Commission (ECHO), which committed US$2.8 million (26.8 percent of total funding); the US, US$17 million (22.7 percent); and Sweden with US$1.5 million (4.9 percent). Other multilateral funding sources included the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), which provided US$5 million (16.2 percent), and unearmarked funds from other UN agencies amounting to US$2.7 million (8.7 percent), with the rest from other sources. A further US$7.5 million was contributed in response to the heavy rains which followed Hurricane Felix, 55.8 percent of which came from Canada, 22.1 percent from Switzerland and 17.5 percent from EU/ECHO.

Donors are principally involved in the provision of development aid through budgetary support to Nicaragua. However, the current government’s relationship with traditional donors is strained and budget support is regarded as providing less leverage for promoting donor policies, including effective disaster risk reduction.

The European Commission, through ECHO, was the main donor, and although it was initially unclear whether it would, in fact, fund the emergency response, information from the field and the regional devastation in Managua prompted the Commission to act. A primary emergency decision for €1 million helped fund Telémica Siam Comunicaciones to provide critical communication services, and the World Food Programme (WFP) and CARE to engage in water and sanitation activities. A later €5 million disbursement covered more comprehensive programming for communities that were harder to reach and incorporated an element of disaster risk reduction.

Conclusion

Hurricane Felix was not a large disaster in terms of its impact or the level of funding directed towards the response. Yet, an analysis of the response to disasters such as Hurricane Felix provides an opportunity to assess disaster risk reduction efforts and how they can influence and improve emergency humanitarian responses. Such an assessment should include all dimensions of local capacity and how prior support has

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strenthened the local response. While it is recognised throughout the humanitarian sector that there is a need to respect and promote local capacity, the international community all too often equates the term local, as seen in Nicaragua, with the national level. Hurricane Felix illustrates the importance of distinguishing and prioritising needs and capacity building more locally, especially in contexts such as the RAAN, where decentralisation is, and must be, a reality, and where communities are isolated. International aid should aim to recognise, identify, use, and strengthen local capacity. It is important for agencies to seek to build and capitalise on existing local networks, and to strengthen existing coping strategies and support systems. A number of organisations and institutions have confirmed that they have learned this lesson from their response to Felix.13 With little surge capacity in the area affected, the ability of the humanitarian community to respond to needs depended on the quality of truly local staff and organisations.

As witnessed in the aftermath of hurricane Felix, assessment, monitoring, and accountability requirements adopted by donors and agencies often rule out assistance in hard-to-reach areas. In combination with logistical constraints, beneficiary-cost calculations – factoring in efficiency and capacity considerations – often contradict GHD Principle 6, which gives priority to reaching those most in need, using a needs-based approach. In situations such as these, both the response and requirements should adapt to situational challenges on the ground.

Furthermore, strategies that are flexible enough to adapt to different phases and interventions will be the most effective way to reach vulnerable people with the right aid. Humanitarian action and development aid are separate types of assistance, for many well justified reasons. The timely rehabilitation of communities suffering from sudden-onset disasters requires flexibility and speed. Experience however shows that recovery is essentially a development issue. In the delicate transition from relief to recovery, repeated needs assessments should be carried out to prioritise communities’ needs, adapt the response to an evolving context, and to long-term livelihood strategies. In a disaster-prone area like the RAAN, responses must mainstream disaster risk reduction, giving full consideration to social and cultural realities.

Finally, instruments such as the Financial Tracking Service must be upgraded to reflect the new role played by non-traditional donors, and to facilitate accurate reporting. The fact that Venezuelan aid is recorded in narrative reports on ReliefWeb, but not included in the FTS, highlights the need for greater coherence.