

**ECONOMIC RAMIFICATIONS OF DISASTER: EXPERIENCES OF  
DISPLACED PERSONS ON THE SLOPES OF MOUNT TUNGURAHUA,  
ECUADOR**

Graham A. Tobin  
Department of Geography  
University of South Florida  
Tampa, Florida 33620-8100

Linda M. Whiteford  
Department of Anthropology  
University of South Florida  
Tampa, Florida 33620-8100

**1. INTRODUCTION**

While estimated losses from disasters are notoriously poor with many real costs hidden or uncounted, it is clear that the global toll from disasters is extremely high. Noji for instance, estimated global losses to be \$23 billion per annum, (17) while CRED put the cost of natural catastrophes between 1991 and 2000 at US\$78.7 billion per year (2000 base-levels). (3) However, these figures usually reflect only direct losses accruing from the physical destruction of goods and appurtenances, leaving indirect and intangible losses out of the equation.

At different spatial scales, other patterns emerge. When losses are calculated as a proportion of total wealth, then poorer countries invariably suffer most. Zupka, in fact, suggested that losses might be up to 20 or 30 times higher in poorer nations, (26) although Anderson argued for a more conservative figure of 20 percent. (2) The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies pointed out that the significance of losses at the national level is often masked because governments must reallocate resources to disaster recovery, rehabilitation, and mitigation, rather than ongoing development projects. (15) In other words, significant opportunity costs are realized under hazard conditions and development initiatives are compromised.

At the local level, similar patterns emerge with poorer people, those economically marginalized, suffering more when loss data are examined proportional to income. This situation can be compounded if people are displaced from their homes and sources of livelihood during a disaster. In fact, the risk is amplified, by further removing options for response. (16) The issue of refugees and displaced persons, therefore, can take on a higher level of significance for hazard managers.

According to the United Nations High Commission on Refugees, the number of people forced out of their homes through life-altering events, such as geophysical disasters (floods, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes), political conflicts, ethnic warfare, or economic crises, has increased annually. (24) In this regard, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies stated, "Towards the end of the 1990s, the world

counted some 25 million ‘environmental refugees’ – for the first time more people fled natural hazards than conflict.” (15) A critical issue, then, is how these people reconstitute their lives after an evacuation. (4)

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Peacock and Ragsdale suggest that to understand disaster recovery, attention must be focused not only losses but also on (a) re-accumulation of capital and physical infrastructure; (b) policies and programs of government agencies, private organizations, and businesses among others; and (c) resource distribution. (20) They contend that recovery of individual households is a reflection of societal recovery and capital re-accumulation efforts, and hence urged consideration of those networks that enhance this process. Furthermore, relief policies and programs can significantly affect the rate and patterns of recovery and can aggravate vulnerability issues after the disaster. (21)

This research explores what strategies people employ to recreate their lives after being forcibly evacuated. It entails not only an understanding of the impacts of disasters that precipitate evacuations, but also an examination of prevailing conditions that affect resilience and recovery. Thus, local context of the economic, social and political realities, that either exacerbate or ameliorate disaster impacts, must be addressed. Specifically, two questions are asked pertaining to loss and recovery: (a) what is the effect of different evacuation strategies; and (b) what is the impact of time away from home?

## 3. METHODOLOGY

The study was undertaken in several communities around the active volcano, Mount Tungurahua in Ecuador. This site was selected because of its historical record of disasters, and because of the researchers’ previous experience in the area. It should be noted that this was part of a larger project that looked at health and community resilience in the face of an ongoing hazard. (22, 25)

Two structured questionnaires were used to collect information from local residents who had been directly affected by the volcano, one undertaken in June 2000 and the other in January 2001. Respondents were selected randomly from four communities (Table 1). The survey instrument incorporated specific questions about personal characteristics, such as age, family relationships, and household income to classify respondents’ roles within household units. Other questions related to losses experienced during and after the eruption of Tungurahua in October 1999. Open-ended questions were also included in the questionnaire to obtain extra information from evacuees. The data were collated and analyzed using standard non-parametric statistical techniques.

TABLE 1  
RESPONDENTS FOR JUNE 2000 AND JANUARY 2001 QUESTIONNAIRES BY  
EVACUATION STRATEGY

Strategy	June 2001		January 2002	
	Total	Percent Female	Total	Percent Female
Colegio Bolivar	42	74	27	82
Quimiag Resettlement	22	36	26	73
Banos Returnees	34	59	84	74
Control - Quimiag	33	79	34	82
Total	131	65	171	77

The questionnaire surveys were conducted to elicit information from evacuees with three different evacuation experiences (Table 1). One group consisted of displaced persons living in the shelters (Colegio Bolivar and Cubijies), another consisted of people who had resettled in the small community of Quimiag, and the third group were people who had returned early to their homes in Baños. A fourth group comprised non-evacuated local

people from Quimiag who were used as a control. The social, economic and day-to-day living conditions varied for these individuals and hence differences were hypothesized regarding losses and recovery. (23) In addition to the structured questionnaires, community leaders, politicians, government officials and members of the civil defense were consulted. In depth interviews with seven focus groups were also undertaken to collect further background information.

#### 4. VOLCANO ACTIVITY AND EVACUATION

Mount Tungurahua is an active volcano located 120 km south of Quito. The volcano has had four periods of intense activity prior to the current eruptive phase: 1641-1646; 1773-1781; 1886-1888; and 1916-1918. (10) The 1773 eruption produced a large debris flow that descended the Vascún valley and Baños narrowly escaped destruction on that occasion. During the 1916-1918 eruptive period, pyroclastic flows moved down both the northwest and north flanks of the volcano. Similarly, in 1886 and 1916, lahars moved through the Vascún and Ulba valleys. (10) The volcano then remained relatively dormant until 1993 when seismic activity gradually increased with more violent venting of gas and ash in September 1999. This initiated the latest active period with ash falling over the landscape, primarily to the west of the volcano and on occasions in the two provincial capitals, Riobamba and Ambato.

A yellow alert was declared on September 15<sup>th</sup> 1999, and Civil Defense authorities started a public awareness campaign and began estimating how many people would have to be evacuated. (12) At the same time, the National Civil Defense formally authorized the provincial *juntas* in Tungurahua and Chimborazo, in coordination with other civil, military and political authorities, to assume responsibility for organizing and implementing measures to mitigate the effects of an eruption. (12) Throughout early October volcanic activity increased and a state of orange alert was declared on October 16<sup>th</sup>, 1999. (9)

##### 4.1 EVACUATION

The change in the alert status prompted authorities to issue a preventative evacuation order, and President Mahuad urged residents of Baños and the neighboring communities of Penipe, Puela and Bilbao to leave the area. (1, 18) Some residents who were being affected by ash, or threatened by mudflows, had already voluntarily evacuated. (18) However, this status did not last and evacuation became mandatory. People residing in the orange zone were given approximately thirty hours to leave the area. (6)

When the evacuation was complete, about 22,000 people had left their homes from some 60 locations, Baños being the largest. Most evacuees did not go to government shelters, but dispersed to homes of friends or relatives. According to the Ecuadorian Red Cross, the Civil Defense set up 125 sites as temporary shelters and the official count of evacuees in shelters rose to 2,443 early in November. (7, 8)

After the evacuation, the military blocked all roads within 20 miles of the volcano and residents were not allowed to return to their homes or land except when escorted. (5) Eventually, however, a group, known as the *Hermandad Baneña*, led protests and mobilizations that resulted in citizens "retaking" Baños on January 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> 2000, despite the military blockades. (14) On January 5<sup>th</sup>, the authorities and the *Hermandad Baneña* signed an agreement that allowed citizens free access to the community in exchange for exempting the authorities from any liability in the event of a major eruption. (11) By mid-January 2000, an estimated 6,000 people had returned to Baños. (19) Since then, the volcano has continued to be active, periodically showering ash on the surrounding landscape. Apart from the October 1999 event, major eruptions occurred in August 2001 and March 2002.

## 5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Recovery can be examined through the re-accumulation of capital, through government relief policies and through resource distribution. In each of these, it became clear that problems would arise in Ecuador once the evacuation program had been implemented. Indeed, the eruptions, the falling ash, and the evacuation all appeared to have had major impacts on the local economy. For instance, people did not have time to prepare properly and many had to leave important possessions behind, including household goods, livestock and pets. (22) Some evacuees, who were forced to leave by the military, felt they were treated like war prisoners. Additionally, some residents told stories of thieves taking advantage of the situation and stealing personal possessions. A few interview participants were victims of violent acts along with robbery. (22)

An examination of household incomes from September 1999, before the eruption in October 1999 and subsequent evacuation, and after the return of displaced persons to their homes in January 2001, demonstrated the overall severity of this event on the local economy. Most respondents reported a substantial decline in monthly household income during this period (Table 2). Using a Wilcoxon signed-rank test, an analysis of monthly incomes showed that overall there was a significant difference in household incomes ( $N = 130$ ;  $z = -1.957$ ; sig. 0.05). The median household income for Baños returnees in January 2001 was 93 percent of that in September 1999, while those in Quimiag resettlement group showed the greatest decline with a January 2001 median income only 48 percent of September 1999.

TABLE 2  
MEDIAN MONTHLY HOUSEHOLD INCOME (US\$) BEFORE AND AFTER  
OCTOBER 1999 ERUPTION BY EVACUATION STRATEGY

Strategy	September 1999	January 2001	Percent of 1999
Colegio Bolivar	40	36	90
Quimiag Resettlement	25	12	48
Baños Returnees	80	74	93
Control - Quimiag	40	31	78
Total	60	60	100

Quimiag evacuees expressed concern about their precarious economic situation especially since they were not generating any income at their new location. Another major problem for some respondents was that they had been forced to sell their land and houses around Tungurahua and hence could not return. Parts of the volcano slopes had been declared too dangerous because of ash and further potential eruptions, so property was sold at very low rates. Since many of these people rely on agriculture for their livelihood, this action effectively eliminated any immediate chance of recovery. While some land outside the risk areas had been donated to the evacuees on a long-term basis (five years) this did not replace the land lost. It also led to other problems as landlords insisted on keeping a share of the produce.

It should be noted, however, that data for the control group (Quimiag locals) showed similar high losses during this period, thus indicating that the volcano was not entirely to blame. In fact, a variety of factors were regarded as responsible (Table 3).

While natural disasters still figure highly, economic concerns and political movements have also affected the evacuees. This is not to say that the volcano did not have severe impacts, since many people lost their homes and means of support, and some had possessions stolen. Nevertheless, the political and economic realities of Ecuador confounded recovery efforts. Concurrent with the evacuation, the country faced political unrest and economic straits. The president was overthrown in January 2000, and the economic crisis intensified as the World Bank insisted that price supports for food and fuel be removed. Ecuador converted to the American dollar, a move that was not popular

with many of the people, to curb rampant inflation. Thus, when placed in context, the volcano took on less significance than the economic crisis for the majority of the population. This is reflected in the response of the control group.

TABLE 3.  
CONTEXT OF CRISES: PROBLEMS FACED BY HOUSEHOLDS (%)

Crisis	Colegio Bolivar	Quimiag Resettlement	Baños Returnees	Quimiag Locals
Loss of Home	26.2	40.9	20.6	N/A
Loss of Crops/Livestock/ Inability to Plant	59.5	86.4	50.0	16.2
Loss of Money/Economic Crises	71.4	77.3	85.3	63.6
Political Turmoil	42.9	68.2	44.1	42.4
Disasters - Volcano, Floods, Landslides	61.9	68.2	44.1	39.4
Family Problems - Illness, Death	61.9	59.1	44.1	42.4
Theft of Possessions	11.9	13.6	2.9	3.0

Adapted from Tobin and Whiteford 2002 (23)

The ongoing issues meant that the government was not in a strong position to facilitate an active or continuing recovery effort. In fact, 50 percent of respondents in the Colegio Bolivar and Quimiag, and nearly 90 percent in Baños perceived that official aid had been insufficient. Evacuees were left with little support and frustrated in attempts to rebuild their resources. Re-accumulation of capital, as it is described in the model, was a remote possibility for most evacuees, and hence the long-term viability of the communities was threatened.

Most residents experienced considerable delays in going home, and ten months after the initial evacuation, many residents had still not returned. Various reasons were given as to why they did not return: their crops were lost, their animals dead, the roofs of their houses were damaged, and the volcano remained active. Indeed, throughout, Tungurahua continued to remind people of its instability by ash showers and rumblings. Evacuees, therefore, had few options and their ability to recover was compromised by limited relief operations, by poor conditions at the evacuation sites, and by damages back home.

Faced with these problems, it is not surprising that overall median household income fell, although the data indicated an interesting relationship with time spent away from home (Table 4). For instance, the greatest median household income decline was experienced by early returnees and by those who remained in evacuation shelters, whereas income actually rose for those who returned at later dates. This does not concur with findings in the literature, which suggest that the longer individuals are separated from their livelihoods through evacuation, the greater the impact on their incomes. In this instance, some households were actually better off when waiting to return home. Further examination is required to explain this finding, although it is possible that early returnees had fewer options than others. In contrast, those staying away from the volcano longer may have had more flexibility from the outset. In addition, those still evacuated, who experienced the largest decline in income, might have experienced the greatest direct losses, including that of their homes.

To determine the specifics of these losses to households, additional questions were included on losses, damages, and destruction from the volcano. These were separated into two categories, those related to agriculture (such as damaged crops, lost animals and problems with harvesting), and those related to other economic concerns (such as losses associated with market share, valuables, businesses and industries). A third category of

questions was included to determine if other environmental factors had had a significant input on losses during this time.

TABLE 4  
MEDIAN MONTHLY HOUSEHOLD INCOME (US\$) BEFORE AND AFTER  
OCTOBER 1999 ERUPTION BY RETURN DATE

Return Date	September 1999	January 2001	Percent of 1999
Oct '99 – Feb '00	60	55	92
Mar '00 – July '00	71	72	101
Aug '00 – Jan '01	80	86	108
Still Evacuated	40	26	65
Total	40	31	78

Not surprisingly, many local people suffered losses due both to the physical effects of the volcano and to the social and economic conditions created by the evacuation. Besides damage to their homes, many lost their crops as well as their farm animals (Table 5). According to a local press report, 95 percent of all crops and pastures in Tungurahua province were destroyed by ash fall. (13) In addition to damage caused by the ash, the inability of people to return to their land and tend to their crops exacerbated their losses and gradually threatened their livelihoods.

TABLE 5  
HOUSEHOLDS WITH LOSSES BY EVACUATION STRATEGY (%)

Strategy	Agricultural*	Economic*	Environmental
Colegio Bolivar	26	78	44
Quimiag Resettlement	68	84	72
Baños Returnees	42	86	53
Control - Quimiag	53	59	59
Total	46	79	56

\*Significantly different responses by evacuation strategy at 95% level. Note: agriculture, economic, and environmental represent an amalgam of a series of questions.

The Quimiag resettlement group suffered the greatest agricultural losses, while Colegio Bolivar respondents suffered the least. An analysis of these agricultural losses showed that there was a significant difference in responses based on evacuation strategies (Chi square = 10.40; 3 degrees of freedom;  $p = 0.015$ ). Further discussions with respondents revealed that those who evacuated to Colegio Bolivar were primarily small business owners, whereas many of those evacuees in the Quimiag resettlement relied on agricultural activities for a living.

Closer review of the economic data indicated that Baños returnees experienced the most losses, along with the Quimiag Resettlement group (Table 5). The Quimiag locals, on the other hand, recorded the lowest losses. Once again, there was a significant difference in responses for economic losses (Chi square = 9.99; 3 degrees of freedom;  $p = 0.019$ ) based on evacuation strategy. There was no significant difference in responses regarding other environmental losses, although Quimiag resettlement respondents did express the most losses. It is possible, given the location of the new fields farmed by these respondents, that they have experienced more difficulties from landslides and mudflows.

The evacuation seriously disrupted the economy of Baños and nearby communities. People who earned their living from growing and selling food in the local market could not take care of their crops; they lost their markets; and there was no one around to purchase their produce. Although some people were able to plant new crops where they found refuge, this was not possible for the majority of the people. In addition, the tourist industry was badly hit by the evacuation and many hotels, restaurants and tour companies closed. Similarly, bus operators serving Baños and connecting it with Ambato and Puyo had their livelihoods put on hold because of the closed roads. According to one news

report, there were approximately 200 transport workers serving the Baños area. Their business was fairly regular, and at the height of the tourist season buses were leaving the terminal in Ambato for Baños every 10 minutes. (13) Of course, there were no buses running during the evacuation period.

There was no pattern to responses based on time away from home. A Chi square analysis of these data based on return dates revealed no significant differences among responses (Table 6). Agricultural and economic losses tended to decline with increasing time evacuated, except for those still away from home, and environmental losses were similar.

TABLE 6  
HOUSEHOLDS WITH LOSSES BY RETURN DATE (%)

Return Date	Agricultural	Economic	Environmental
Oct '99 – Feb '00	57	90	53
Mar '00 – July '00	43	83	50
Aug '00 – Jan '01	33	82	53
Still Evacuated	57	79	79
Total	53	59	59

Note: agriculture, economic, and environmental represent an amalgam of a series of questions.

To test if these findings were a function of household size rather than evacuation strategy or time away from home, the data were also examined based on the number of people living in each household (Table 7). An analysis of the economic data revealed that these responses were significantly different based on household size (Chi square = 15.3; 2 degrees of freedom;  $p = 0.000$ ). Similarly, the environmental data were also significantly different based on household size (Chi square = 6.58; 2 degrees of freedom;  $p = 0.037$ ). However, for the most part this was a function of one-person households that recorded the lowest incidence of problems in each category; in contrast other household sizes were very similar. Agricultural data were not significantly different.

TABLE 7  
HOUSEHOLD WITH LOSSES BY HOUSEHOLD SIZE (%)

Household Size	Agricultural	Economic*	Environmental*
One Person	25	25	13
Two to Four Persons	43	84	60
Five or More Persons	49	80	56
Total	46	79	56

\*Significantly different responses by household size at 95% level. Note: agriculture, economic, and environmental represent an amalgam of a series of questions.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Many of the economic issues that people faced during the evacuation period continued to pose difficulties for the people living in and around Baños. Although people had been able to return to their land and houses, not enough people had returned to enable the economic system to function at its former level. People who worked in the markets did not have sufficient customers to sell their products to; not as many people were traveling between Baños and other communities, so there was less work for bus drivers; and there were not as many tourists, so many hotels and restaurants remained closed or were operating with low occupancy rates, and tour companies and tour guides were mostly idle. Throughout the ash fall area, farming became very difficult.

These results show that little official attention has been given to the contextual difficulties of the local inhabitants. Losses have been considerable with some individuals suffering significant setbacks in their livelihoods. Capital has been very slow to re-accumulate, new resources have not been well distributed, and many structures lie un-

repaired. Work on roads, for instance, has almost stopped and many buildings in Baños are still unoccupied. Furthermore, disaster policies and mitigation programs are virtually non-existent beyond simple evacuation strategies, and many residents maintain an ambivalent attitude towards both the volcano and the government. Nevertheless, the problem goes far beyond the volcano. The economic straits in which Ecuador finds itself, combined with the political turmoil both add to the overall concerns expressed by local residents and complicate recovery efforts. In this way, the theoretical framework put forward by Peacock and Ragsdale provides a good foundation for examining post-disaster environments. (20)

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