



From Participation To Commitment Community Plays Starring Role in Local Risk Management, Chile

Disaster and emergency management, rather than merely responding to an existing crisis and trying to learn a few lessons when it is over, increasingly focuses on specific prevention mechanisms involving direct actions to reduce those hazards and vulnerabilities that threaten the future well-being of communities.

Based on the conviction that so-called natural disasters are ultimately the result of social processes that increase the vulnerability of communities to natural phenomena, the Chilean National Emergency Bureau of the Ministry of the Interior (ONEMI) has designed and implemented novel preventive strategies that, with sociology's help, integrate the disaster reduction efforts of all sectors of society into a systemic whole, using the concept of Shared Responsibility.



Any resource of information is valid for communal leaders, especially on rural areas, to present to the people they represent those tasks that, undoubtedly, will improve their quality of life.

As part of this approach, ONEMI has developed a new decentralized Civil Protection Model that gives pride of place to the local level. In addition to the traditional involvement by the authorities, technicians, and scientific bodies, communities themselves are brought in, not as the target of the intervention, but as proactive, committed stakeholders. While this inclusion is still unusual, it simply recognizes their skills, rights, and duties to be effective collaborators in the procurement of their own protection and safety.

In line with this, a Community Participation Program was established within the framework of the Five-Year National Civil Protection Training Plan for 1996-2000. It employs a risk assessment and managing methodology that focuses on risk and resource microzoning.

The Program set itself the goal of incorporating an information, communication, and training mechanism into a broader strategy involving what was called Shared Action. This established a joint government/organized community model that requires a commitment by all stakeholders to fulfill their responsibilities in local risk management, based on the assumption that people feel a strong commitment to that which they have helped to build themselves.

Methodological Support



ONEMI launched the pilot phase of the project in 19 communities in Chile in order to test the participatory management model.

In order to make the model sustainable, the AIDEP methodology was developed. It enables local authorities and community leaders to identify risks and resources, establish priorities, and plan and execute actions for managing priority risks. In this way, government and civil society make their own contributions, based on their strengths and competencies, to bring about greater safety and a substantive improvement in the quality of life of the community.

Didactic materials were produced for local governments and community social organizations.

Municipalities received a Process Application Manual. It covers such issues as how to divide the work up by sectors, identify community leaders, train communities in the AIDEP methodology, develop participatory emergency preparedness plans, design mitigation projects, and procure funding for them.

Community leaders were given manuals on how to organize their constituencies for disaster mitigation, apply risk and resource microzoning principles, and develop integrated, coordinated plans for disaster response and project generation.

After these tools were created, ONEMI launched the pilot phase of the project in 1996. After 19 communities had had a chance to test the participatory management model, another 75 Chilean municipalities spontaneously chose to adopt it. The experimental phase ended in December 1998. It was evaluated on the following year to assess the following items:

1. Participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of the model.
2. Specific advances in emergency and disaster prevention.
3. Specific advances in disaster mitigation projects.
4. The establishment of coordination networks for response and control.
5. Participants' perceptions of changes to their safety since the start of the Program.

The experimental stage of the Program confirmed ONEMI's original hypothesis, which was that information, training, and education on their own are not enough to generate a community commitment to managing their own safety. They only make sense when the resultant knowledge can be used to establish closer links with the authorities and make sure that their own views, experience and capabilities are taken into account by local governments in determining disaster prevention measures.

The presence of active, committed community members who are aware of their responsibilities to their own safety is the highest proof of the success of the Program, which has led to the development of specific risk mitigation projects managed jointly by the authorities and communities. In addition to the reduced risk of loss of life and property, the Program has had the significant side benefit of improving the credibility of local governments while increasing the self-reliance of local communities.

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