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Special Publication 38

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This report is based on 1999-2000 field visits and interviews in the Dominican Republic, Honduras, and Nicaragua by authors Alvarez, Baird, Gawronski, Olson, and Sarmiento, individually and in varying combinations in the different countries. Ricardo Alvarez took the lead on the Nicaragua chapter, and Amelia Estrada was primarily responsible for the media analysis.

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Editor's Note

Ideally, the current report should be read after reading [Special Publication 36](#) in this series, which focused on institutional response problems and political dilemmas in the Andean countries associated with the 1997-1998 El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) event. That report, *The Marginalization of Disaster Response Institutions: The 1997-1998 El Niño Experience in Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador*, is available in English from the Natural Hazards Research and Applications Information Center, University of Colorado, 482 UCB, Boulder, CO 80309-0482, and on the World Wide Web at <http://www.colorado.edu/hazards/sp/sp36/SP36.html>.

Special Publication 36 is also available in Spanish from the Regional Disaster Information Center (CRID), P.O. Box 3745-1000, San José, Costa Rica, and at <http://www.crid.or.cr>.

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Abstract

The 1998 Atlantic storm season will be remembered principally for two hurricanes: Georges and Mitch. Hurricane Georges was a September storm that was especially damaging to the Dominican Republic and then Haiti before making U.S. landfall in Mississippi. Hurricane Mitch was an October storm that followed an unusual track out of the southwest Caribbean and then over Central America, where it inflicted catastrophic losses, especially in Honduras and Nicaragua. Indeed, Mitch has joined that relatively small number of terrible storms whose names have been retired.

This study examines the impacts, institutional response, and the "disaster politics" (including media attention) associated with Hurricane Georges in the Dominican Republic and Hurricane Mitch in Honduras and Nicaragua. A particular focus is the marginalization or "sidelining" of agencies in the three countries that were supposed to be the official response and coordinating organizations.

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Introduction

Disasters in Context

A major assumption underlying this study revolves around what scholars call "event-context interaction," which is a sophisticated way of saying that disasters never occur in societal vacuums. Much more often than not, and especially in less economically developed countries, disasters occur in-and affect-sensitive and already stressed socioeconomic and political systems. In addition, and as much as professional disaster managers and humanitarian organizations would prefer nonpolitical host country environments in which to work, disasters and disaster response almost always become domestically politicized. For that reason, a disaster, its impacts, and the response must be "contextualized"-examined and understood in the sociopolitical context in which the disaster occurs.

To extend this point, disasters and catastrophes are not only physical or scientific phenomena but also economic, social, political, and psychological events. As such, they are "constructed" (described, interpreted, and given meaning) in large part by the media. In addition, the media play a vital role in reporting-and sometimes distorting-the nature, level, and importance of both domestic response and international assistance. For better or for worse, the media have a major influence on how societies "remember" their disasters. Thus, analysis of domestic media coverage (attention levels, attention spans, and blame themes) in the affected countries is necessary to more fully explain event-context interactions.

Apart from the scholarly analysis here, it must also be added that a rather hard-edged institutional response proposition (explained below) may lead to difficult questions and uncomfortable conclusions about 1) Latin American and Caribbean host government disaster management capabilities, and 2) consequent international assistance options. In fact, as will be shown below, the experiences with Hurricane Georges in the Dominican Republic and Hurricane Mitch in Honduras and Nicaragua lead to precisely that problem.

HDI, HPI, and TI's Corruption Index

For reasons that will become obvious later in this study, it is important at this point to locate the three countries in question (Dominican Republic, Honduras, and Nicaragua), not geographically, but rather in terms of their level of development. From the United Nations *Human Development Report 1999*, [Table 1](#) reproduces the Human Development Index (HDI) scores and the global and regional rankings of the Dominican Republic, Honduras, and Nicaragua. The HDI is important because it seeks to measure not the "wealth" of a country but rather the quality of life ("a decent standard of living") for average citizens. For that reason, the HDI components are an interesting mix: life expectancy, adult literacy, school enrollment, and real GDP per capita. The Dominican Republic ranks 88th worldwide on the HDI (14th among 19 Latin American countries). Honduras and Nicaragua are far behind, the former ranking 114th worldwide (17th in Latin America), the latter 121st worldwide (dead last in Latin America, 19th).

Table 1**Human Development Index (HDI) Rankings,
Latin American Countries, 1998**

HDI Rank Worldwide	HDI Rank Hemispheric	Country
34	1	Chile
39	2	Argentina
40	3	Uruguay
45	4	Costa Rica
48	5	Venezuela
49	6	Panama
50	7	Mexico
57	8	Colombia
58	9	Cuba
72	10	Ecuador
79	11	Brazil
80	12	Peru
84	13	Paraguay
88	14	Dominican Republic
107	15	El Salvador
112	16	Bolivia
114	17	Honduras
117	18	Guatemala
121	19	Nicaragua

Source: United Nations, 1999

[Table 2](#) takes an even sharper look at the three countries: their place on the Human Poverty Index (known in the literature as HPI) from the 1998 *Human Development Report*. The HPI comprises the following: percentage of the population not expected to survive to 40 years of age; adult illiteracy; population without access to safe water, health services, and sanitation; percentage of underweight children; various measures of income disparity; and population percentage below the poverty line. Of the 77 developing countries ranked worldwide, the Dominican Republic was 18th, Honduras was 25th, and Nicaragua was 32nd. Separating out just the 15 Latin American countries covered, the Dominican Republic ranked 8th, Honduras 11th, and Nicaragua 13th. That is, all were below the numerical midpoint,

with Honduras and Nicaragua near the bottom.

Table 2

**Human Poverty Index (HPI) Rankings,
Latin American Countries, 1997**

HPI Rank Worldwide*	HPI Rank Hemispheric	Country
2	1	Chile
3	2	Uruguay
5	3	Costa Rica
7	4	Mexico
8	5	Colombia
9	6	Panama
15	7	Ecuador
18	8	Dominican Republic
20	9	Paraguay
24	10	Bolivia
25	11	Honduras
27	12	Peru
32	13	Nicaragua
37	14	El Salvador
39	15	Guatemala

***Developing Countries Only**
Source: United Nations, 1998

Finally, [Table 3](#) presents the Transparency International (TI) 1998 Corruption Perceptions Index. The 1998 TI index covered 85 countries, and Table 3 shows the corruption scores for most countries of the Western Hemisphere (including the U.S. and Canada) as well as their global and regional rankings. The Dominican Republic is not covered in the TI rankings, but Honduras and Nicaragua are. Nicaragua tied for 11th of 18 in the region, and Honduras came in next to last at 17th. The corruption issue is especially relevant to later discussions of Hurricane Mitch.

Table 3

The Transparency International (TI)

**1998 Corruption Perceptions Index,
Western Hemisphere Countries**

World Rank	Hemispheric Rank	Country	1998 CPI Score	Standard Deviation
6	1	Canada	9.2	0.5
17	2	USA	7.5	0.9
20	3	Chile	6.8	0.9
27	4	Costa Rica	5.6	1.6
41	5	Peru	4.5	0.8
46	6	Brazil	4.0	0.4
49	7	Jamaica	3.8	0.4
51	8	El Salvador	3.6	2.3
55	9	Mexico	3.3	0.6
59	10	Guatemala	3.1	2.5
61	11	Argentina	3.0	0.6
61	11	Nicaragua	3.0	2.5
69	13	Bolivia	2.8	1.2
77	14	Ecuador	2.3	1.5
77	14	Venezuela	2.3	0.8
79	16	Colombia	2.2	0.8
83	17	Honduras	1.7	0.5
84	18	Paraguay	1.5	0.5

Source: Transparency International (TI), 1998

1998: A Very Bad Year

As shown in [Figure 1](#), the 1998 Atlantic hurricane season was extraordinarily active, with 14 named tropical storms, 10 of which reached hurricane category. Indeed, at one point in time, the National Hurricane Center in Miami was tracking five named storms simultaneously—the first time that had happened. Nonetheless, two particularly deadly hurricanes made landfall, and 1998 will be remembered for Hurricane Georges (in September) and especially for Hurricane Mitch (in October). Sadly ironic, without Hurricane Mitch, the Atlantic storm year of 1998 would be remembered mostly for Georges (track #7, [Figure 1](#)) and its destructive path through the Caribbean and into the United States. Mitch (track #13), however, made Georges pale by comparison, inflicting catastrophic losses on Central America.

Analytic Purposes

As noted above, one purpose of this study is to summarize and contextualize disaster impacts and then profile and evaluate institutional response and change following the hurricanes of 1998. A second purpose, however, is to test a working proposition initially developed in a study of the 1997-1998 El Niño in the Andean countries of Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador (see Olson et al., 2000). The proposition is that most Western Hemisphere national governments systematically under-fund, under-staff, and thereby render organizationally, administratively, and politically weak their disaster management agencies to the point that those agencies are incapable of dealing with anything larger than local emergencies or small-scale disasters. Truly overwhelmed when faced with a larger event (such as a major hurricane), these agencies are replaced, marginalized, or "sidelined" by higher-profile, but temporary, organizations created ad hoc to deal with a particular disaster event. The result is 1) disaster agency loss of morale on one hand, and 2) lack of organizational continuity on the other. This problem is exacerbated by the overwhelming orientation of virtually all disaster agencies toward response and the parallel lack of mitigation mandates and capabilities, despite clear evidence that a majority-perhaps even the vast majority-of disaster losses (human and property) could be avoided by effective mitigation. Hurricanes Georges and Mitch provide exemplary case opportunities to explore this proposition and related issues.

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