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Risk management: an alternative perspective in gender analysis

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Risk Management: An Alternative Perspective in Gender Analysis

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1. Summary

Managing and reducing risks, as oppose to emergency management and response, is key to avoiding worsening levels of disaster occurrence and loss. In developing regions, such as Central America, disasters are principally associated with regularly occurring small scale events at the local level and with hydro-meteorological hazards such as floods, flash floods and landslides. Local level risk management, therefore, has a key role to play in disaster reduction.

Gender analysis can play a key role in improving the relevance, effectiveness and efficiency of local level risk management for a number of reasons:

- Gender relations have an important influence on the development processes that configure the evolution of hazards and vulnerabilities in local level risk scenarios.
- In contrast to infrequently occurring large-scale events, the kind of disaster loss associated with small scale disasters regularly affects the lives and livelihoods of highly vulnerable groups and thus becomes one of their development priorities to manage and reduce.
- Vulnerable women and men have greater possibilities of influencing decision making processes related to risk management at the local level, in contrast to such processes at the national, regional and international scales

In regions such as Central America, processes of local level risk management therefore offer a privileged space. Through factoring gender considerations and analysis into activities such as training and participatory planning it is possible to contribute significantly both to reducing disaster occurrence and loss as well as to more equitable and sustainable development.

2. Introduction

Despite the efforts of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR) during the 1990s, it has now been extensively documented that the occurrence, severity and intensity of disasters have continued to increase.⁽¹⁾

When disaster loss begins to exceed development gains, a crisis unfolds and poverty alleviation, good governance and other sustainable development goals recede into the horizon. Physical, social, economic and territorial development in many countries increases hazard, vulnerability and risk. When risk considerations are not factored into development and post disaster recovery, a vicious cycle unfolds. Economic growth and social welfare becomes eroded by disaster loss, while increasing demands are made on humanitarian assistance.

While the IDNDR and recently the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR) have promoted the importance of developing a culture of prevention² both national and international efforts continue to be characterised by massive investments in emergency management, humanitarian assistance and reconstruction. These investments have not been reflected in reduced disaster occurrence and loss. There is an urgent need; therefore, to promote approaches that focus on risks rather than disasters and on the development processes that configure risk scenarios. Disasters should be properly conceptualised as unresolved development problems that occur when risks go unmanaged. (Blaikie 1994: 234) A sustainable reduction in disaster occurrence and loss can only be achieved by factoring risk reduction considerations into development and into post disaster recovery, using disasters themselves as windows of opportunity for change³.

Given that development processes are always configured, in one way or another, through gender relations it is essential that gender considerations should be integrated within policy and strategy frameworks to manage and reduce disaster risk.

Up to now, the incorporation of gender perspectives into disaster risk management strategies has been incipient and has remained relatively unresearched and undocumented. In particular, most of the case study material available on gender and disaster risk focuses on how disasters impact men and women in different ways and how disaster response and emergency management often fails to take into account gender considerations.⁴ Case studies focusing on how gender relations influence the configuration of disaster risks and on how risk management could be enhanced by factoring in gender considerations are few and far between, to say the very least (Fothergill, 1996: 33) . Most organisations and agencies working on risk management issues, even those working from a social perspective, fail to pay more than lip service to the importance of gender. Even when gender considerations are included in programme design, this tends to be in a top-down manner, without the participation of the vulnerable communities involved and without recognising the peculiarities and particularities of each context. Vulnerable men and women are rarely involved in discussions about their needs and rarely have access to decision making processes in the planning and policymaking spheres (Anderson 1994: 8).

The present paper is going to present an alternative reading of the disaster problematic, emphasising the regularly occurring small scale events which manifest the day-to-day risks faced by vulnerable communities. At the same time, it is going to argue that the principle opportunities to factor gender considerations into risk management occur at the local level. Finally, the paper will make a number of recommendations regarding an agenda for gendered risk management. While the paper is general in scope, particular mention is made of risk scenarios and experiences from Central America.

3. Gender⁵ Relations and Risk Configuration

Disasters are generally viewed as isolated, exceptional and unforeseen events that require emergency responses. Normally the emphasis placed by policy makers, donors, relief and development agencies is on the event itself, rather than on the conditions of risk in which the disaster event was incubated or on the linkages between these risk conditions and broader social, economic and territorial processes.

As a result, most interventions to address disasters are during or after emergencies. While there has been a growing interest in disaster preparedness, the focus is still on the disaster as an event and unrelated to society and development. There are still few systematic programmes directed at managing the risks that generate disasters rather than at managing disaster events themselves.

The risk management perspective conceives disasters as unresolved problems of development; in other words as characteristics and consequences of development processes. Therefore, to manage risks it is necessary to understand and manage the development processes, within which risks are generated, in "normal" times and not just when a disaster event occurs.
(Maskrey 1993: 1)

Risk is configured through a complex combination of vulnerabilities and hazards. There is no risk if there are hazards but vulnerability is nil or if there is a vulnerable population but no hazard event. (Davis 1994: 21)

Hazard refers to the probability of occurrence of a potentially damaging event. Hazards can be natural (such as an earthquake or a volcanic eruption) but normally are socio-natural in character, given that processes of human intervention condition the occurrence and severity of events such as floods, flash floods, landslides, drought and fire. Processes of territorial expansion, inadequate land-use, environmental degradation and badly planned infrastructure developments, amongst others, all influence hazard patterns.

Vulnerability refers to the capacity of people to absorb the impact and recover from a hazard.⁶ Vulnerability is related to a wide range of factors,

including bad siting of settlements and infrastructure, poor quality construction, poverty and lack of assets, political exclusion, weak social organisation and lack of education. Vulnerability can be categorised in different ways, for example (Anderson 1994:7)

People may be physically vulnerable and live in poorly-built houses on land that is susceptible to hazards

People may be socially and economically vulnerable by being marginalised and excluded from decision-making, political and market processes

People may be psychologically vulnerable if they feel powerless, victimised and unable to take effective actions for their own security

Any risk scenario is made up by the complex and dynamic interaction between vulnerabilities and hazards, in the context of broader societal development processes, such as urbanisation, migration, production and consumption relations and others. Gender relations are both a causal factors in the configuration of a risk scenario, given that they condition many, if not all, of the processes that generate hazards and vulnerabilities. At the same time, they are conditioned by these processes, in the sense that a particular risk scenario necessarily will be characterised by a particular configuration of gender relations.

The characteristics of gender relations both within and between social groups have a great deal to do therefore with how vulnerabilities, hazards and risks are generated, managed or in many cases left to accumulate until disaster occurs. The activities of daily life in a risk scenario configure a set of co-ordinates in space and time where physical hazards, social relations and individual choices converge. Patterns of vulnerability emerge at this convergence, where gender relations condition other vulnerability factors related to poverty, environment, socio-economic status, etc.

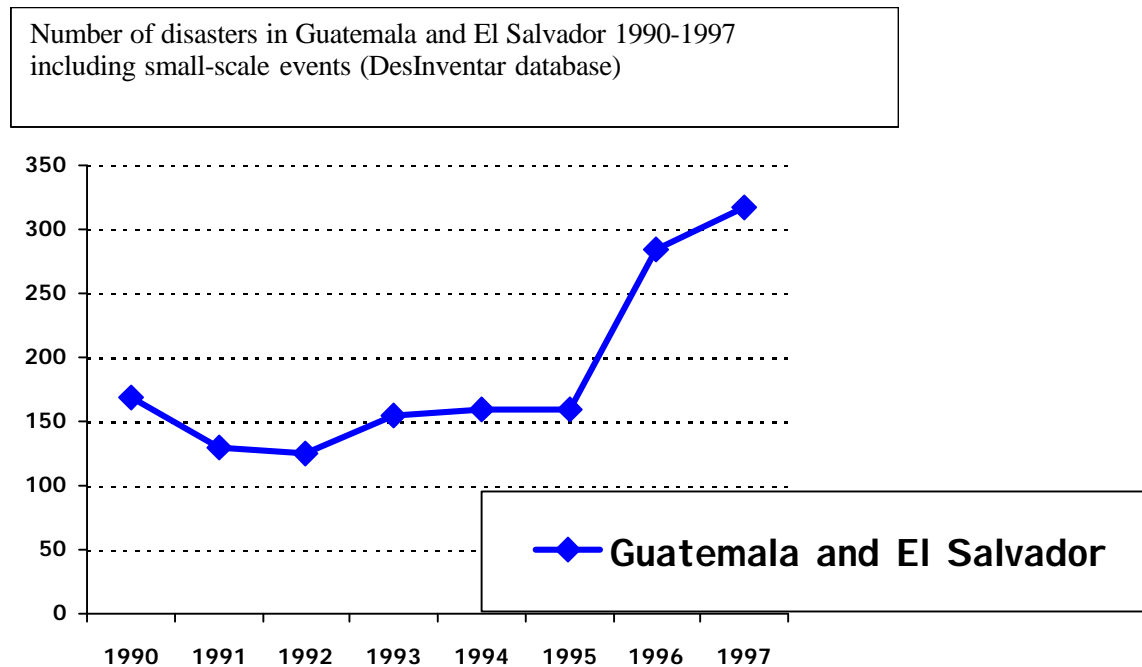
A gendered analysis of risks is therefore key to understanding and preparing to manage any particular risk scenario. On the one hand, this involves identifying how and why there are some individuals and social groups more at risk than others are. But more importantly, it involves analysing how different patterns of gender relations contribute to either the generation or management of different kinds of risk. (Hewitt 1996: 29) This analysis needs to take into account the relations and the process between women and men,

recognising inequalities in terms of economic access and resources. In the case of women, it is often stated that women are among the most vulnerable, not because it is in their physical nature to be weak, but because of societal processes that result in their poverty, political marginalisation and dependence on men. (Hena Hasna 1992: 67)

In all societies, men and women experience different vulnerabilities and have different capacities as a result of their gendered roles. Sometimes these roles are very different and rigid; sometimes they are overlapping and fluid. In either case the failure to identify gendered roles in the configuration of risk scenarios, and to take them consciously into account, has resulted in risk and disaster management programmes which may actually increase the vulnerabilities and risks faced by certain social groups and individuals and which fail to take advantage of clear opportunities to manage and reduce risks.

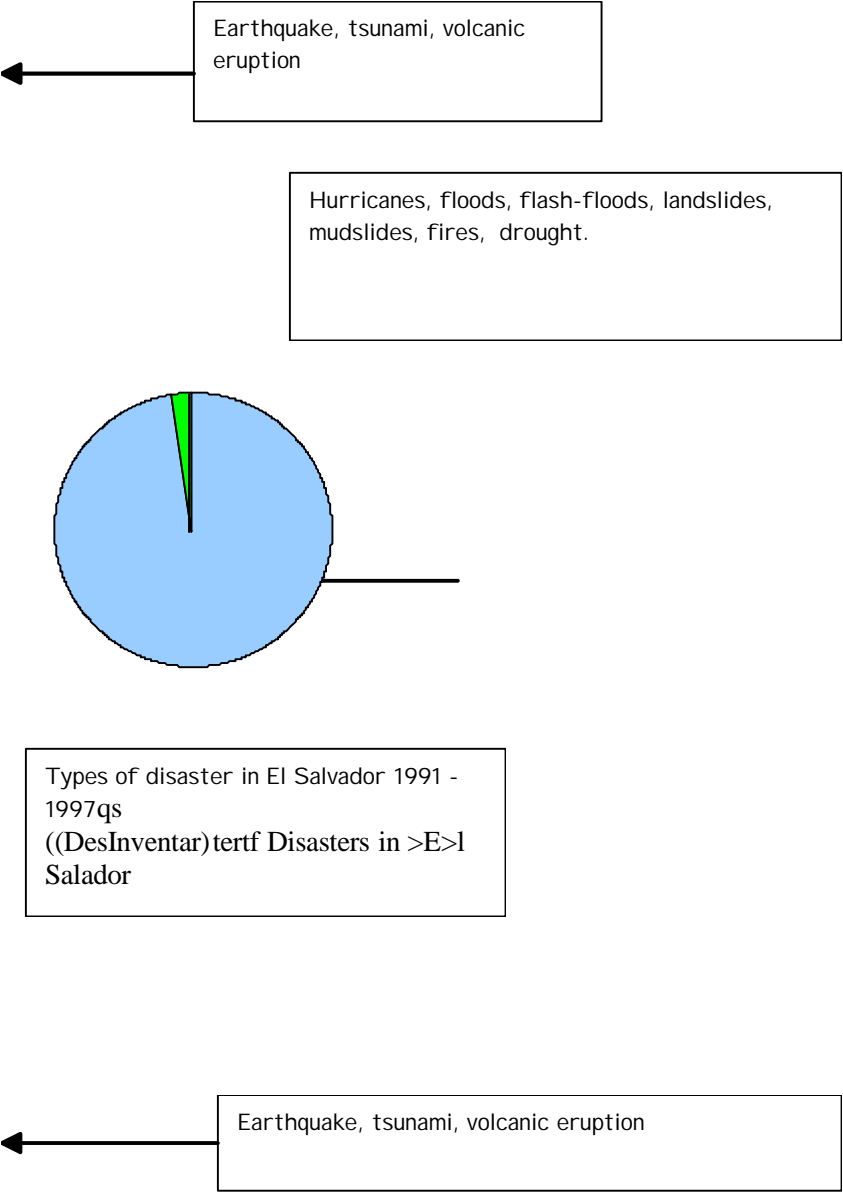
4. Small Scale disasters and local level risk scenarios

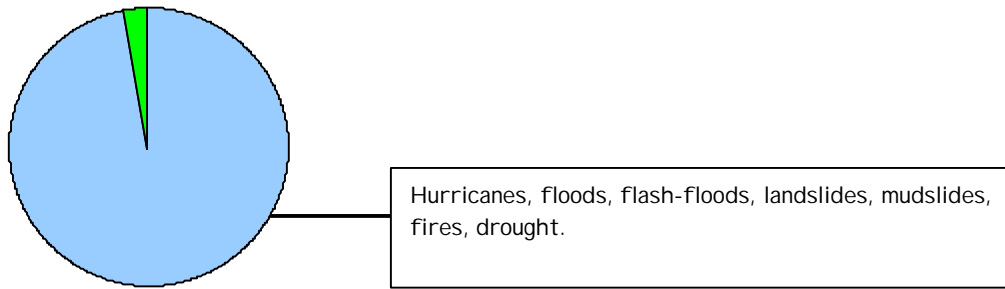
Disasters are generally portrayed by the media and by international agencies to be associated with large-scale hazard events. They are visualised as “stand-alone” problems, requiring complex, large-scale interventions, managed normally by exogenous actors and stakeholders. However, the vast majority of disasters are small scale local level events and their occurrence and impact receives little or no international or external attention. Disaster loss is increasing rapidly due to frequently occurring small and medium sized disaster as well as occasional large catastrophe and its impact is a process of gradually evolving loss not limited just to extreme events. ⁷



These invisible day-to-day disasters are managed almost exclusively by local, and in the best of cases, by national actors. These disasters are the day-to-day business of both national disaster management agencies, local level structures and of course vulnerable communities at risk.

The case of Central America is very clear. For example, in Guatemala and El Salvador, there are important differences between, what we call, large and small disasters and their impact in terms of human loss. For the same period (1991-1997) there were 414 disaster events (small, medium and large scale), registered in the DesInventar database, versus 11 large-scale disasters registered in the global CRED-EMDAT database. Table 2 shows as well that most disasters were associated with hydrometeorological hazards than with internal geodynamic hazards.





Types of disaster in Guatemala 1991 -1997q
 ((DesInventar)tertf stertf

In other words, they were closely associated with development processes that lead to environmental degradation and poverty. Desegregated information, on the impact of these disasters on women and men is unfortunately not available but it is possible to correlate the numbers affected in determined localities with poverty and demographic statistics, and explore who and how they were affected.

These smaller-scale disasters have assumed an increasing importance for a number of reasons:

their territorial coverage and impact is rapidly increasing. Small scale disasters begin to occur in regions with no history of large scale disaster occurrence through processes of risk configuration and accumulation

it has been increasingly suggested that the accumulative impacts of these permanent and recurrent events may approximate, if not exceed those associated with large, but relatively infrequent disasters and catastrophes.

many of these small events may be precursors of the large scale events of the future, as both hazard and vulnerability levels increase in areas subject to economic and territorial development and population increase

the ability to intervene in the risk processes which generate this type of disaster or to

deal with the consequences once they occur, serves as a "training ground" for, and a measure of the possible future efficiency of local and national actors in dealing with larger scale events.

these events tend to recur in annual or other temporal cycles, and lead to the continuous and persistent erosion of livelihood and development options for the vulnerable communities at risk. They have a disproportionately high impact on the most vulnerable sectors of a society. In contrast they have a relatively low impact on strategic infrastructure and economic sectors.

Given that they impact more the poor than the rich and given their small scale recurrent nature little external assistance for rehabilitation or reconstruction is generally forthcoming, signifying that the affected population and communities must deal with the problems using their own scarce resources.

Because of their frequent occurrence and their intimate relationship with local development processes, they often represent a "real" problem immersed in the daily life of local communities rather than the hypothetical problem posed by a "50 -year" earthquake.

The still incipient debate on "small-scale" viz a viz "large-scale" disasters has begun to have important repercussions. In recent years an increasing importance, both in research and in terms of programmes, has been given to the potential of local community-based approaches to disaster risk management and to mechanisms and instruments for an increased, dynamic, and participatory role for local actors in these approaches.

If we accept the importance of small-scale disasters for the reasons mentioned above, then the critical role of vulnerable local communities, civil society, municipal government in the overarching challenge of reducing disaster loss and occurrence should be more than evident. Unless capacities are increased at the local level to manage and reduce risks, disaster occurrence and loss will continue to increase exponentially, despite efforts at the international level to manage the risks associated with large-scale disasters.

At the same time, it is in the risk scenarios at the local level that gender relations are most visible, both in terms of managing risks as well as in terms

of suffering the impact of disasters. It is at the local level that the greatest potential exists for exploring how gender analysis can contribute to a greater understanding of risk accumulation and more importantly to more relevant, effective and efficient disaster risk management.

In the case of women –often one of the most vulnerable groups - gender analysis may help to further a process of change through which vulnerability and risk is reduced, for example through support which answers women's needs by financing income –generating activities to give women more economic power; improving their livelihood by promoting education, health and the preservation of the environment; and supporting grassroots initiatives in the rural population.(Reardon 1993:23)

Similarly it may help to strengthen the space for women's independent reflection and expression: often bound by their socio-cultural and political environments, particularly those from the most vulnerable groups of the community. This in turn may lead to new perspectives on effective risk management strategies, which without gender analysis would be invisible given that women may not have been given the opportunity to say what they want or are able to do.

4. How to factor gender analysis into capacity building?

Capacity building at the local level is fundamental to managing and reducing disaster risks. In general terms, capacity building refers to a process through which individuals and organisations strengthen their ability to delimit, structure and understand determined social, economic and environmental problems, to identify and mobilise resources in order to overcome them, and to maximise opportunities for sustainable improvements in the standard of living of the population. This is determined by:

- the capacity of people to construct policy information, infrastructure and institutions,
- to train and educate human resources and
- to facilitate the participation of stakeholders in the decision-making process.

From the perspective of the World Bank this process involves three levels or components: individual knowledge and skills; institutional capabilities; and, the development of rules, procedures and understandings that people, societies and institutions can hold and work by. (Lavell 2001: 3)

In terms of gendered capacity building for risk management at the local level, this must refer to a process by which women and men in their different roles and organisations strengthen their abilities to:

- a) Analyse and understand existing patterns of risk in the locality, dimension these risk patterns in social, spatial and gender terms, and understand the gendered process through which these risks were generated
- b) Anticipate and project future patterns of risk, and associated disaster impacts, again with gender differentiation, generated by ongoing and gendered natural, social and technological processes.
- c) Elaborate legislation, policy guidelines and strategies, and implement plans, projects and activities that promote:

- i. A reduction in the levels of risk;
- ii. An increase in the economic and social efficiency and effectiveness of disaster response, rehabilitation and reconstruction schemes.

The final objective of capacity building must be to contribute to a continuous and sustainable increase in the overall levels of development of the community at risk and to increase in the standards of living of its members.

In the context of risk reduction in Central America, there have been several initiatives in capacity building (especially training courses) implemented by international and regional organisations; some of them more or less successful, but in general all characterised by similar problems:

- The training programmes have been designed and implemented without taking into account gender considerations;
- While a handful of women may sometimes be consulted, rarely does a thorough understanding of the complexity of gender relations help structure the process, the analysis and any resulting community risk management plans.
- These programmes are not articulated with strategies at an institutional level
- The lack of a gendered analysis of the community means that some local capacities were often overlooked.
- The concept of community has often been viewed naively, or in practice dealt with, as a harmonious and internally equitable collective; too often there has been an inadequate understanding of the internal dynamics and differences.

Towards an agenda for gendered risk management at the local level

While natural events will continue to occur, human action can either increase or reduce the vulnerability of societies to these and related technological and environmental hazards, through the socio-economic factors and processes which configure vulnerability and risk. Amongst these factors and processes we have argued that it is crucial to take into account the different strategies through which women and men generate, cope with, manage and are affected by risks. At the same time we have argued that the local level is a privileged space where gender analysis can help women and men, as social actors to participate, organise, plan and in general play a decisive role in the design and implementation of risk management plans.

Given that, at the present time, even those organisations supporting local level risk management from a social perspective are not factoring gender analysis into either their conceptual or programme work, there are a number of challenges which need to be addressed:

- Given the dearth of research on how gender relations configure risk accumulation processes and given that the existing literature on gender and disasters focuses almost exclusively on impact and response, it is essential to research, document and analyse from a comparative perspective case studies which clearly demonstrate and provide evidence that gender does play an important role in the configuration of risk. This research needs to highlight comparative levels of risk in women and men, and trends in disaster risk accumulation, identifying the contribution of different factors to its configuration. as well as promoting best practice and local efforts in risk reduction
- In the context of this broad research aim, particular attention should be given to how continuously occurring small-scale disasters represent a particular challenge for vulnerable communities at risk. Despite the efforts of certain regional networks, particularly in Latin America, awareness of this problematic and its relevance for gender analysis is still extremely low. It needs to be identified and analysed the different strategies for coping that women and men implement during the

occurrence of small disasters, together with capacities and social informal networks. In this sense it would be very important to identify and document the different experiences of local level risk management that have been implemented and analyse to what extent gender considerations have been taken into account.

- Statistics of disaster occurrence and loss are rarely desegregated by gender. Efforts could be made to work with those organisations that produce disaster information, such as CRED and LA RED⁸) to see how gendered disaster information could be produced.
- This evidence from a serious programme of comparative international research needs to be disseminated to policy makers and planners, not only in the international organisations but also in the NGO's , national government agencies and others involved in disaster risk management, particularly at the local level
- Efforts need to be made to develop, test and validate tools, methodologies and other instruments for factoring gender analysis into local level risk management. This may include participatory diagnosis, training methods, the use of geographical information systems and others. Once such instruments have been validated then it would be critical to train those involved in programme design and implementation in their importance, relevance and application, perhaps through a training-for-trainers approach. For example, Geographical Information Systems (GIS) have been proposed and utilised for mapping elements of hazard and physical vulnerability, with potential to improve the effectiveness of risk management at the local and national levels. However, their development to include social variables and gender considerations is still very incipient. ⁹ Methods for vulnerability assessment need to be address properly the needs of women and men in any given situation. Proper demographic information is necessary, disaggregated for sex and age as well as ethnical and cultural differences; all of this in order to be able to do risk-mapping
- Local level capacity building programmes, which factor in gender

considerations and analysis need to be properly highlighted and supported as a priority of the I SDR. capacity building needs to be supported at local level through identifying women's and men needs and opportunities, selecting appropriate training materials and methodologies, establishing collaborative partnerships with training institutions, facilitating workshops and monitoring results and using the results of systematisation and knowledge networking.

- Efforts also need to be made to adjust and improve national level administrative and legislative systems for disaster risk management in order to take into account gender considerations, particularly in relation to local level risk scenarios.
- All the above proposals could form part of a broad programme for supporting gendered risk management at the local level with including technical backstopping, knowledge networking, documentation, and comparative analysis. In particular, it is important to continue generating spaces, such as the current workshop which facilitate the sharing of knowledge, information and experiences on gendered risk management issues and which provide a platform for comparative analysis

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¹ In 1999 alone, there were more than 700 large-scale disasters, resulting in the death of approximately 100,000 people and causing economic losses in excess of US \$100 billion. This reflects an annual increase of approximately 10 per cent during the decade of the 90's. ISDR, 2000. *Report of the Secretary General: Implementation of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction*, page 2. Geneva: United Nations.

² This concept is developed by Kingdon (1984) and he argues that an event, in this case a disaster, is useful for identifying problems, politics and actions in the future

³ Excepting the work of Blaikie, Cannon, Davis and Wisner (1994) and the earlier literature on gender, drought and famine (Agarwal 1990; Jiggins 1986; Vaughan 1987; Shroeder 1987; Downs et al. 1991), gender relations are rarely analysed directly.

⁴Gender refers to women and men's roles and responsibilities that are socially determined

⁵ Gustavo Wilches-Chaux (1989) explains the concept of Global Vulnerability and identifies 12 components (physics, social, ideological, cultural, political, ecological, etc)

⁶ Consult the Web page [www. Desenredando. Org](http://www.Desenredando.Org) (Proyecto Desinventar) in order to access an information relates with the smalls and medium sized disaster in Central America

⁷ La Red de Estudios Sociales en Prevencion de Desastres en America Latina