



# Coordinating a regional response to natural disasters

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How much longer must the government departments responsible for disasters remain the Cinderellas of the national budgets?

From the moment it was decided that the High-Level Conference on Natural Disasters would be held in Haiti in November 2007, I have designated it as the activity of greatest interest and political weight that the ACS would host this year, because it deals not only with the dialogue that the ministers and high-ranking officials will have regarding the pressing and sensitive issue of the meeting, but the fact that it would be held in Haiti, a country that has historically been seen as an example of the struggle for freedom, for the abolition of slavery and for the solidarity that it had with the independence of the peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean.

Having accepted that Haiti could be the host of this important conference is in itself a recognition by the governments of the ACS that the necessary conditions exist in that country to carry out a regional dialogue of the highest political level and significance with regards to natural disasters. In this sense, the attendance of ministers and other high-ranking officials, as well as representatives of international organisations, is in itself a demonstration of trust in Haiti and its people.

I believe that we are obliged to highlight this commitment to Haiti, recognising the progress made to date and calling on the rest of the international community to continue increasing their support to this country, until it succeeds in heading, once and for all, down the path of development and social harmony. But also to end once and for all those epithets such as 'threat to regional peace', 'failed state', 'poorest country' and other equally pejorative terms that serve no other purpose than to generate negative perceptions of the first people of the region to achieve their freedom and their independence by abolishing slavery.

In its IV summit, the Heads of State and Government, through the Panama Declaration, recognised the vulnerability of our countries and territories when faced by natural disasters, and the resulting negative impact on their efforts towards ensuring sustainable development. They also reiterated that the best way to combat this vulnerability is through the integration of disaster reduction

into developmental policies and plans at all levels.

This decision is evidence of the political commitment and of the degree of thought that our Heads of State and Government have given to this problem, which is why the celebration of the Haiti conference is an integral part of the vision that the political leaders of the region wish to assign to natural disasters.

It is for this reason that it is necessary for the technical levels of the ACS to arduously work for the formation of political ties that can guide the efforts towards the creation of strategies of prevention and mitigation, in order to liberate the people from the negative effects that have been taking place in recent years, in which the affected, mainly, have been the poorest sectors in each of the countries.

In this regard, the first objective that we must accomplish is to develop a mechanism of coordination for the response to and preparation for such a disaster within the region. In doing so, we must take into consideration the national policies of countries and make sufficient adjustment to the strategies of the specialised organisations that exist both within, as well as outside the region. In the meantime, let us achieve an adequate level of coordination so that we will not only be able to count on an efficient structure to face the challenges imposed by nature year after year, but we will also be elevating the levels of cohesion amongst ourselves and increasing our credibility among international organisations and donor countries.

In order to achieve this primary objective, we need to begin a better exchange of information regarding risk reduction when facing the imponderable events that nature may bring. But we also need to speed up the exchange of experiences in order to incorporate the lessons and best practices learned which, to date, are many. There is nothing to impede our progress in this respect, because it would be sufficient to implement a mechanism that depends only on ourselves.

At this time, it is worth remembering that those present at the Haiti conference approved the document entitled "The Havana Consensus", wherein it was decided to



take into account the United Nations Development Programme and that of the International Strategy Secretariat for the Reduction of Disasters, directed towards establishing a Transcultural Network for Disaster Risk Reduction, which would be an extension of the one which is already operating in Cuba.

In that same order, and within the framework of the Havana Consensus, it is necessary to strengthen regional capacities for the programming and planning for a quick recovery following a disaster, where risk reduction is effectively integrated into the recovery process and the need for reconstruction on a disaster scale is impeded. In this regard, it is the job of the ACS to support the development of policies with recovery programmes directed at reducing future risks. These policies should also integrate an early warning system centred on people, with which we would be contributing to the creation of a

subject in the region, namely:

- How long must we wait before strengthening our prevention and preparation capabilities?
- How much longer must we wait for the installation of an early warning system?
- When will we include disaster management costs in our budget planning?
- When will we implement a better public health infrastructure?
- Until when will the promotion of a public conscience, and the preparation of community and education campaigns centred on the community and those most at risk, remain on our to-do list?
- How much longer must the government departments responsible for disasters remain the Cinderellas of the national budgets?

In order not to weigh readers down with these

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Dr Silié addresses the ACS High-Level Conference on Disaster Reduction in Haiti

solid base for sustainable socio-economic development.

Each one of these agreements has been accepted by the government representatives and without a doubt they continue to support them. But if we look back, we will realise that we have not moved forward towards achieving these goals with the speed being demanded by the more frequent occurrence of the events we are facing.

Equally, we all agree without major discrepancies with the Hyogo Framework for Action, the Kingston Declaration and many other agreements and documents of the international community that refer to this issue. But we need to ask ourselves whether we have acted at the level demanded of us by this crude reality that hits us year after year.

This is why I allow myself to ask the following questions of the experts and political authorities on this

questions, of which there are many more, I will tell you that we already have part of the answer, and that this is in our hands, because I believe that by strengthening the coordination levels for joint action, we could undoubtedly achieve better resources and technical capabilities in order to confront these heavy annual challenges, which must be confronted from a regional perspective, without national particularities, or being exclusive.

If the Haiti conference is worth something, and it undoubtedly marks an historic turning point for the region, it is the strengthening of our alliance of purposes, assigning greater political will to this subject. In this way we will be honouring the victims who are no longer with us and acting more effectively towards addressing the demands of the thousands affected by hurricanes, mudslides, floods and earthquakes every year. ■