

# New Books

## The Marginalization of Disaster Response Institutions

The 1997-1998 El Niño Experience In Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador

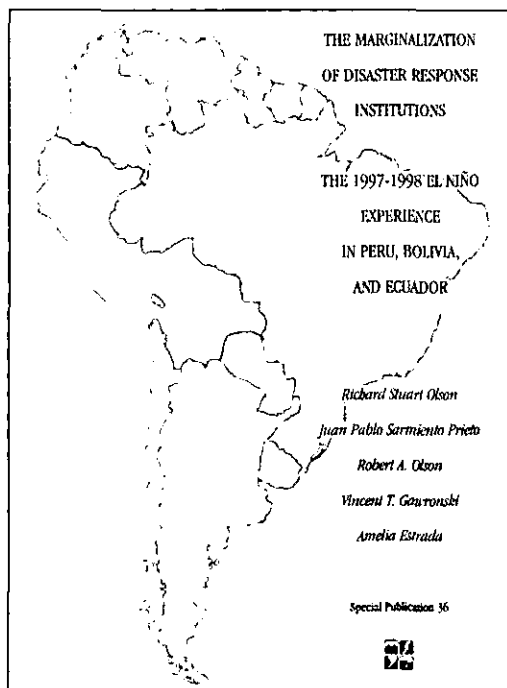
By Richard Stuart Olson, Juan Pablo Sarmiento Prieto, Robert A. Olson, Vincent T. Gawronski and Amelia Estrada

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One of the latest in the invaluable series of Special Reports published by NHRAIC and made freely available in both hard copy and electronically for reproduction, this study sets out to answer a deceptively simple question—based on the experiences of Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador in dealing with the ENSO event of 1997–1998 (and to a lesser extent their experiences with a similar event in 1982–1983): Will the governments of those countries be institutionally better prepared to deal with the *next* major ENSO?

Two critical assumptions underlie the study, that institutional readiness to deal with disaster is a political and policy issue rather than primarily technical or administrative issues, and that disasters themselves are innately political events because of the enormous demands, multi-sectoral coordination requirements and decision-making stresses they impose on governments. The study recalls Quarantelli's 1987 analysis in which he noted that *accidents* and *emergencies* are typically dealt with by emergency services but *disasters* and *catastrophes* require higher-level coordination with all its political and policy implications, and suggests that in the case of all three countries the ENSO event of 1997–1998 broke through the emergency/disaster 'firebreak'.

The study's selected *unit of analysis* is the civil defence organisations in the three countries, which in each case was nominally the 'national emergency organisation', and examined the roles they played in the 1997–1998 event. Its principal finding is that at the outset of that event, as it was perceived that the 'firebreak' had been breached, these organisations were rapidly pushed to the sidelines by one or more new but temporary governmental



organisations charged with managing the response, in all three cases responsible to the highest levels of government. It concludes that while there is evidence of *intra-organisational* learning in all three countries as a result of the 1997–1998 event, examples being in the ministries of health and in various scientific offices, there remain major problems at the level of *inter-organisational* and multi-sectoral coordination.

Thus there is a likelihood of continuing marginalisation of the nominal 'national emergency organisations' in future major events.

Factors identified as contributing to this situation include national institutional elements such as short-term political 'horizons' in planning for the future and the lack of permanent civil service structures which can provide for administrative stability and organisational 'memory'. However, and given the study's chosen *unit of analysis*, the civil defence organisations themselves are seen to a considerable extent as contributors to their own lack of success.

Traditionally, such organisations have tended to be event-oriented, focussed primarily on preparedness and response, and limited in capability in dealing with major events. Perhaps more critically, however, they are generally seen as having low political salience and as only marginally relevant, if that, to the needs of governments having to deal with the

complex political, social and economic problems which come with disasters. The study suggests that managing the *situation* created by a major ENSO event ideally requires the same approach to managing national development in general—ENSOs themselves are so complex that they really should not be defined as just 'events'.

Particularly for those of us involved in developing risk management approaches to the management of community safety risk and concerned about the proper ownership of the community safety risk management process, there are clearly policy implications in the present NHRAIC study.

Reviewed by:

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### Price and ordering details

The publication can be purchased for US\$10.00 plus \$8.00 for shipping.

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The publication is also available from the Natural Hazards Center Web site at: [www.colorado.edu/hazards/sp/sp.html](http://www.colorado.edu/hazards/sp/sp.html)  
The report can be viewed on-line or downloaded in Microsoft Word 97 or PDF format.

A Spanish version is also available in print or on-line from:

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