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Dealing with Disasters

Capacity Building Toolkit for National Civil Society Organisation Platforms

**CASE
STUDY**

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**In the wake of the war:
Strengthening Civil
Society responding to
disasters in Colombia**



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Civil Society in Colombia responds to the consequences of civil war, including internal displacement and consequent poverty and insecurity. National CSO Platforms (NCPs) and members recognise the challenges of forging positive relationships with government, establishing their 'value offer'. They gather and communicate local knowledge of needs and priorities, in response to both intensive and everyday disasters. They recognise the challenges of securing CSO recognition and participation alongside other actors.

Context

The people of Colombia lived through fifty years of civil war. Peace was only generally restored in 2017.¹⁷ Colombia possesses a vibrant civil society which has been intimately engaged with human rights, justice and poverty alleviation issues over that period.¹⁸ One estimate is that there were a total of 296,467 CSOs in the country in 2016, equating to one CSO for every 163 inhabitants.

Case study contributors

CCONG, the Colombian confederation of non-governmental organisations, is a national organisation of non-profit entities, created in 1989, including regional and departmental federations, associations, corporations, and national foundations, working for the common good. It focuses on sustainable development, human rights, governance, democracy, and peace. It is a member organisation of Forus.

Website: <https://ccong.org.co/ccong/>

Fundación Azimuth (FA) is a non-governmental, non-profit organisation dedicated to

environmental, cultural, economic, social, and territorial development. It provides consulting, research, participation, management, and planning services for the public and private sectors. It supports the development of communities and groups in difficult and vulnerable conditions. It is a member organisation of GNDR.

Website: <https://www.Fundacionazimuth.org/>

Focus on: Colombia

Strengthening Recognition of Civil Society

Both organisations recognise the challenge of establishing recognition with government and other actors. FA find this difficult even at municipal level, and the larger CCONG says it has taken seven years to enable CSO members to make clear their '*oferta de valor*' ('value offer' or their added value as an organisation). They found it was important to make a positive offer, rather than focusing on funding. One method is to develop plans for building the solidarity of communities and recommendations for action in response to local and national emergencies. The credibility of proposals and plans can be strengthened by establishing local committees, for Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) for example. This makes it clear who they are speaking for and what structures underpin their proposals. These methods build credibility and the 'value offer'. FA believe an important aspect of this is being seen to act in response to disasters. This underpins and adds weight to advocacy.

Local knowledge as a foundation for their legitimacy

Both organisations feel that though there is a national DRR policy and legislation, there is limited understanding of local needs. There are round tables for DRR at regional and municipal

level, but these don't normally include local and indigenous actors. Methods of formalising local knowledge can help introduce it into the DRR system. FA participate in Views from the Frontline and feel this is a valuable tool. They also make use of meetings with groups of local people to '*sistemazar*' their work (collect and systematize lessons learned). However, these methods demand time and energy and busy local actors often have limited time. They also find that the language and terminology used locally is different to that used technically. Bridges need to be built between these to improve understanding. One way of doing this is through multi-stakeholder workshops, helping to break down the barriers of understanding.

Challenge centralised approaches to disaster risk reduction, response and recovery

Both organisations feel government tends to adopt centralised methods in response to disasters. There is also a tendency to focus on one dominant issue, which in Colombia is peace. For these reasons, local needs are poorly understood by the government and by platforms. Platforms have to bring local concerns and needs to government attention.

Local CSO members play an important role in communicating the needs of vulnerable people. They also highlight the range of disasters people are facing locally, not just major crises such as Coronavirus, but other everyday disasters too. In the case of Coronavirus, for example, there are many female-headed households which face consequential challenges to food security, livelihoods and health. Platform members can share this knowledge.

Coordinate specialist expertise of different members to ensure effective response

FA emphasise that it is necessary to 'walk the territory'. As 'outsiders', even though there may be technical expertise and knowledge, particular local situations are not well understood. It is

important to fully understand local priorities. Often risks people face are complex. Everyday disasters include many threats and social risks, such as anti-personnel mines, rape, and violence associated with the conflict. Therefore, DRR should be a cross-cutting theme to all other topics. Because of this complexity it is important to draw on the specialist expertise of different member organisations, for example in dealing with land mines, and to work together.

'Hipervivencia' or 'bouncing forward'

FA value working at local grassroots level, learning from indigenous and Afro-descendent communities who have been pursuing resilience in their own way for many years. Rather than referring to '*supervivencia*' (survival) they speak of '*hipervivencia*' (hyper survival). This has to do with conserving communities.

Summary

In common with the experience of CSOs in many countries, governments often lack understanding of CSOs and their 'value offer' and may even be suspicious of them. CSO Platforms need to make the value of CSOs clear to government so that they can gain a 'seat at the table'. The legitimacy of CSO Platforms and members depends largely on the knowledge they share. This is rooted in local experience, priorities and needs.

Local organisations are typically busy activists. As a result, processes of reflection and systematisation of knowledge are often neglected, but they remain vital in establishing the key role of civil society. In response to everyday disasters, advocacy by CSO Platforms must be clearly grounded in local knowledge, challenging centralised government approaches. The term '*hipervivencia*' (hyper survival) emphasises that the objective of DRR is not simply to 'bounce back' from disasters, but rather to 'bounce forward' through transforming communities and strengthening sustainable livelihoods.

FOOTNOTES

¹⁷ The following links from diverse sources offer accounts of the period of the war:

<https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/colombias-civil-conflict>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-19390164>

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2018/01/colombia-civil%20war-farc-guerillas-peace/>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colombian_conflict

GMH. BASTA YA! Colombia: Memories of War and Dignity, Bogotá, CNMH, 2016

<http://www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/descargas/informes2016/basta-ya-ingles/BASTA-YA-ingles.pdf>

¹⁸ See the following links for information on the role of civil society:

<https://www.wola.org/analysis/civil-society-is-colombias-best-bet-for-constructing-peace/>

<https://www.devex.com/news/wave-of-killings-threatens-civil-society-work-in-colombia-91435>

¹⁹ THE CIVIL SOCIETY OF COLOMBIA Van C. Evans
Ph.D thesis 2016 Indiana

<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/46964685.pdf>