Analyzing Socio-Political Responses to Disaster in Honduras: The Case of the Municipality of Potrerillos

presented by

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Slightly over a year ago Honduras experienced one of the worst natural disasters in its history. Mitch, a hurricane with maximum sustained winds of over 180 miles per hour, lingered on the northern coast of this country from October 26 - 28, 1998. On October 29 the hurricane made landfall. It slowly crawled over Honduras during the next four days by moving in a southward and then westward direction. Although Mitch was downgraded to a tropical storm soon after entering land, its torrential rains poured incessantly over the country, dumping as much as six feet of rain in some areas during its week long assault. Flooding occurred in most of the river valleys and coastal regions while mud slides were reported in many, steep, mountainous areas. An estimated 7000 people died, 8,000 remain missing, and over 600,000 were evacuated as a result of this storm. The country’s infrastructure was affected severely also. An estimated 70% of the country’s general transportation system, 20% of the schools, 11% of the health facilities and much of the country’s water and sewage systems were damaged or destroyed.

Hondurans are currently in the midst of reconstructing their country. The government has challenged itself and its citizens to not simply rebuild what existed before Mitch, but to also transform and improve it. In order to tackle this Herculean task, both the national government and international aid organizations have extensively analyzed how Mitch has affected the infrastructure and economic productivity of this country. Projects are currently being implemented on the basis of this technocratic analysis. However, little attention has as of yet been given to how this recent natural event may have affected people’s ability to act socially and politically in the existing post-disaster context. We believe that Hondurans’ ability to rebuild and transform their country will depend not only on whether and how the country’s infrastructure is being reconstructed or its economy is being reactivated but, perhaps more critically, on people’s capacity to integrate themselves actively into the social and political spheres that are determining whether and how the country’s reconstruction and transformation will occur. This paper seeks to improve our knowledge of the social effects of disaster by analyzing how Mitch has impacted the community organization and political participation of disaster victims in one municipality of Honduras: Potrerillos, Cortés.

The department of Cortés was one of the areas of the country most negatively affected by Mitch. Although this hurricane/tropical storm did not pass directly over this department, its excess rainfall caused the Ulua and Chamelecón Rivers—the two largest rivers in this department—to break their banks, unite as one and inundate the Sula Valley which composes much of Cortés. It is estimated that approximately 28% of the population of the area was “gravely affected” by this disaster and had to be housed in temporary shelters. Although two other departments had higher percentages of its population in shelters, no other region of the

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2 Naciones Unidas y CEPAL, Honduras: evaluación de danos and Secretaria Tecnica y de Cooperación Internacional (SETCO), Republica de Honduras, “Actualización daños ocasionados por el Huracán-Tormenta Tropical Mitch,” noviembre - diciembre 1998, found at www.cetco@gbm.hn.
3 The department of Colón had 31.2% of its population (67,361 people) in shelters and the department of Choluteca had 37.6% of its population (151,739 people) in shelters.
country registered as high a number of gravely affected people as did this one, where over a quarter million people were forced to evacuate their homes and seek refuge in shelters.  

Potrerillos is one of the municipalities in Cortés that experienced the most significant amount of damage as a result of Mitch. The Humuya and Blanco Rivers which dissect this municipality, overflowed and inundated the valley region and about half of the urban heart of Potrerillos. The flooding destroyed or caused major damage to the 355 houses, 15 bridges, 42.5 kilometers of unpaved roads, 28 kilometers of river dikes and the municipality’s entire water and sewage system. Although no one here died or disappeared as a result of the storm, over 3000 people or about one fifth of the Potrerillo’s population had to be evacuated.

As devastating as Mitch was to the residents of the area, the nightmare they experienced did not end with the passing of this storm. In August and September of 1999 Potrerillos was once again assailed by a deluge of water. This time the perpetrator was not a hurricane or tropical storm, but an uncharacteristically rainy season. Most of the agricultural lands in the municipality were inundated anew. The dikes and dirt roads that had been repaired just months earlier were destroyed, and a new wave of people had to be evacuated. Most of these had already been housed in shelters in late 1998. However, they had returned to their communities and rebuilt their homes soon after the Mitch-induced floods had receded. This second time, however, disaster victims were prohibited from resettling in lowland areas. At present, three agricultural communities are living in temporary macro-shelters. Over 400 families are still waiting to be permanently relocated. Although Potrerillos was not the municipality that was most affected by Mitch, the devastation and trauma caused by both this storm and the 1999 rainy season make this an ideal site in which to analyze both how major natural disasters affect the organization and political participation of communities and how this organization and political participation affect, in turn, the process of reconstruction.

**What Theory Tells Us**

During the last half century the theoretical literature on the social effects of disaster has proliferated. Much of this literature has been dedicated to discussing how disasters affect the organization and solidarity of a community. Hoffman, Form and Nosow suggested that during the minutes immediately following a disaster, victims act in an individualistic manner in order to safeguard their basic needs and that of their family. Oliver-Smith has added that during these moments, people’s responses to the crisis may be varied: some flee, others struggle to rescue both themselves and close family members, while still others offer assistance to anyone who may be in need. This information is derived from a hand written tally of damages caused by Mitch that is stored in the Municipality of Potrerillos.

Two other municipalities stand out as having experienced far greater devastation than Mitch: the municipality of Santa Rosa de Aguán in the department of Colón and the municipality of Morolica in the department of Choluteca. Both municipalities were completely destroyed as a result of Mitch. Due to the extraordinary and unrepresentative nature of these two cases, however, this research will focus on Potrerillos.


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need of help. Once the initial impact of a disaster subsides, however, community solidarity and cooperation increases and social differences tend to be ignored. Examples of this kind of solidarity may be seen when flood victims help rescue others stranded on trees or rooftops or when earthquake survivors form search teams to find and unearth people trapped under the rubble or debris of buildings. In essence, the disaster literature suggests that “the consequence of a disaster event on a locality is in the direction of the ‘creation’ of community.”

Often new groups or organizations will emerge in a community during the post-disaster, emergency phase. Various conditions may facilitate the emergence of new groups. Palmer and Sells have suggested that when the official authority lapses and fails to adequately respond to the needs of a community or when a community is either unprepared or has no previous experience dealing with a disaster, then new groups are more likely to arise. These groups tend not to possess the same characteristics as organizations that exist in normal situations. Unlike other organizations, however, these emergent groups tend to be informal in structure and are temporal in nature. Once the crisis has subsided, they generally disappear.

Although communities do experience greater unity in the aftermath of disasters, they do not all respond to these events in uniform ways. The social patterns of behavior that characterized a community before a disaster significantly shape the way they will respond to the crisis. In other words, pre-disaster behavior is a good indicator of post-disaster conduct. The way people handle or bury the dead, for example, may be consistent with community norms that existed beforehand, and the political context may determine who responds to the crisis and how. Therefore, “the theme of continuity is the logical starting point for trying to understand organizational responses immediately after disaster impact. People do not abandon their social histories when confronted with adversity—and organizational systems reflect it.”

The theme of continuity is perhaps more clearly evidenced once the emergency period has ended. When people’s emergency needs have been met and they have returned to their normal

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16 Drabek, Human Systems Responses to Disaster, 158.
and routinized mode of life, communities tend to revert back to the way they were before the disaster. Intra-community conflicts resurface and there is usually a marked decline in collective action. The groups that arose during the emergency phase tend to disappear, and traditional leaders and organizations re-emerge. All of this suggests that long-term, disaster-induced change is rare. 17 Those changes that do persist tend to be ones that were under way or under consideration before the crisis; disasters merely help to accelerate such shifts. 18 Some researchers, have noted instances in which long term, organizational changes have arisen as a result of crisis. Anderson notes that such transformations can endure if an organization’s relation with its environment is altered, new procedures and norms are proposed or external support for change increases as a result of the crisis. 19 Thus, disasters offer a window of opportunity for changes that may otherwise be difficult to achieve.

Although theorists have revealed some fascinating trends regarding how a community and organizations respond to disasters, few have attempted to analyze how a disaster may affect larger social units such as a political system. Those who have studied the interplay between politics and disasters have tended to focus on how political factors help produce a disaster or influence the flow of aid in its aftermath. 20 Some have explored how disasters impact the development of public policies. 21 Unfortunately, little research has been conducted on how these events affect people’s political participation and relation with the government. This later issue remains inadequately explored. The data to be presented in this paper will reveal whether and how a disaster may affect the political participation of its victims. Some of the literature on political science can offer us some guidance as to what we may expect to find on this issue.

Political science has a long theoretical tradition which argues that people who actively engage in community organizations tend to be politically active. De Tocqueville observed upon first coming to America that the United States had a vibrant associational life. 22 He noticed that community groups or associations taught people how to cooperate and act together for the public benefit and thus reasoned that these “civil associations pave the way for political ones.” 23 Almond and Verba were the first to statistically analyze the relationship between civic associations and political participation through a now classic, cross national study. They concluded that people

18 Drabek, Human Systems Responses to Disaster, 295; Quarantelli and Dynes, “Response to Social Crisis and Disaster,” 34-35; and Miletii, Drabek, and Haas, Human Systems in Extreme Environments: 138 and Oliver-Smith, Martyred City.
23 De Tocqueville, Democracy in America, 513-525
who belong to civic, voluntary associations tend to participate more in politics than those who do not engage in such groups. More recent studies continue to support this contention. Based on such findings, many political scientists have come to conclude that a strong associational life or civil society can strengthen democracy and improve citizen’s relationship with the government.

The theoretical literature that has just been reviewed suggests that there are certain social responses that we may expect to find among disaster victims in Potrerillos. First, it is likely that during the emergency phase community solidarity increased and new, informal organizations emerged. Different communities may have responded to this disaster in different ways, depending on their pre-Mitch characteristics. For example, new organizations may have arisen in some communities but not in others or the type of solidarity evident in one area may be very different from that found in another. Due to the transitory nature of such responses, however, it is questionable whether community solidarity and organization still exist in Potrerillos now a year and a half after Mitch. Although the most severely affected communities have still not settled into new and permanent homes, it is possible that people have reverted to their pre-disaster patterns of behavior. Our research will explore whether this has in fact occurred. Lastly, the political science literature suggests that if in fact a disaster has induced greater cooperation and organization in an affected community, then this may in turn also augment the level of political participation among disaster victims.

Both quantitative and qualitative research methods have been employed in this research in order to determine whether these expected socio-political responses to disaster have in fact arisen in Potrerillos. Three hundred and seventy households were selected at random out of a total of over 2800 to participate in a municipal-level survey. Working under the premise that the residents of a household tend to share similar views or experiences, we surveyed only one adult member from every house in our sample, ensuring that we alternated between male and female respondents. In addition to this survey, interviews were conducted with members of the municipality and local non-governmental organization. Lastly, informal conversations were held with various residents of Potrerillos. Often, these conversations were conducted immediately before or after a survey was administered. Although the research being conducted in Potrerillos is still a work in progress, we feel that the information that has been gathered thus far is sufficient to provide us with some preliminary insights on how Mitch has affected the organization and political participation of residents from this municipality.

The Municipality Responds to Disaster

The residents of Potrerillos responded to the immediate, post-Mitch period in a manner consistent with what the disaster theorists predicted. Neighbors rushed to each other’s aid, helping less fortunate members of the community evacuate from flooded areas, rescue personal belongings, and find adequate food and housing. The churches and schools in the area were converted into temporary shelters for flood victims and countless volunteers rushed to these areas in order to assist those less fortunate than they. When the floods began, only one doctor was available in the entire town. He, together with the local Red Cross and various community volunteers, worked around the clock helping to tend to the sick and injured. This period of heightened solidarity and community activity persisted unabated for slightly over a week, during which time Potrerillos was completely cut off from the rest of the country. (Telephone lines had been knocked down by the rain and wind, the bridge connecting Potrerillos to the larger northern town of San Pedro Sula had been destroyed, and the road which connected the municipality to the capital had been partially damaged and blocked by mud slides.) Although this community activism declined slightly as external aid began to flow into Potrerillos in the weeks after Mitch, residents continued to work together in order to confront this emergency situation. As the crisis stabilized and those most severely affected by the storm began to be fed, housed and cared for by formal organizations such as the Red Cross and the Organization for International Migration, community activity and volunteerism markedly declined. The crisis, so it seemed, was being managed by those best able to confront this situation; therefore, the active participation of the community was less necessary.

Now, seventeen months after the initial disaster struck Potrerillos, it appears as if residents from the area have reverted to their pre-disaster state of social behavior. We asked our survey participants how easy it was to work with other members of their community now compared to how it had been before Mitch. As our graph to the right reveals, one third of the respondents said that things were now the same as they had been before the disaster. In many cases, these respondents elaborated that it was now equally difficult to work with others. One fifth of those consulted said that they could not answer this question because they do not work with other members of their community, while another fifth believe that working with others is now more difficult than in the past. Only 18% of our survey respondents said that working with others is easier now than before.

The poor solidarity or sense of community in Potrerillos was further revealed by another series of questions in our survey. We asked study participants to describe for us the type of organization that existed in their community before Mitch. Approximately a third of those consulted said that there was no organization in their community before Mitch, and another third said that what little organization existed there in the past was weak. About 12% indicated that they did not know anything about their community’s level of organization and, therefore, could
not comment on it—a response that further indicates the debility of Potrerillos’ civic society before Mitch. We then asked our survey participants how they would characterize their community organization now. As the graphs above indicate, there seems to be no noticeable change between the community organization that existed in the area before Mitch and the one that exists there today. In both time periods, the level of organization in the area has been frail. This is further substantiated by the fact that only a quarter of those who participated in our survey admit to being part of a church or other community group. It, therefore, seems as if no long-term change in community organization has arisen in Potrerillos as a result of the floods that assaulted the area in late 1998 and 1999. What little solidarity or community organization did arise in this municipality during the post-disaster period was both brief and fleeting.

The political science literature on civil society would suggest that due to the weak level of community organization in Potrerillos, citizen political participation there should have been and continue to be minimal. In order to determine whether this suspicion is correct, we asked our survey participants whether they had 1) attended a cabildo abierto—something similar to a town hall meeting—both before and after Mitch, 2) contacted a government official both before and after the disaster, and 3) voted in the last four elections and intended to do so again in the future. Our research results suggest that the residents of Potrerillos participate only minimally in politics. Less than one fifth of our municipal sample said that they had attended a cabildo abierto both before and after Mitch. Only 11% said that they had contacted a government representative at least once before this storm. Four percent of the people who had not contacted their government representatives before Mitch, admitted to having done so afterward. All of this supports what the political science literature had already led us to suspect: that those who do not engage in the organizational life of their community tend to be politically inactive.

The only political action that residents from Potrerillos appear to undertake with some fervour is voting. Eighty six percent of those consulted proudly admitted to having exercised their suffrage in at least one of the last four elections. The majority of these have voted in all of these elections. Those who have voted only once or twice in the past have generally done so because they are too young to have voted more often. Interestingly, 65% of those we interviewed said they had no interest in politics and one fifth admitted that they do not receive any news on
this issue. The high percentage of voter turn out, therefore, seems a bit surprising. When we asked people why they vote, an overwhelming number of them answered, “because it is my duty.” Residents from the region, therefore, do not seem to vote because they really care about political issues. They do so because they feel they must. This dutiful approach to voting does not seem to have been altered in any way as a consequence of Mitch. Only 13% of our sample said that they will not vote in the next election. This is the same percentage of people who have not voted in the past. These results, together with the previously-mentioned ones on political activity, suggest that the disaster induced by Mitch has not sparked any significant political change among the residents of Potrerillos. They are as politically inactive now as they were in the past.

Although these municipal-level survey results seem to confirm what the theoretical literature on disaster and politics would leads us to expect, there is reason to doubt whether the data just reported reflects how an area heavily affected by a natural disaster will socio-politically responds to such a crisis. Forty three percent of those whom we consulted through our survey stated that neither they nor any member of their household had experienced bodily injury or property damage as a result of Mitch. Another 21% of them reported experiencing only minor damages as a result of this event. Although the entire municipality suffered the after shocks of the disaster (E.g., they were left without potable water for six months, many people lost their jobs, the economy declined, etc), the fact that so few households experienced significant damage as a result of the floods suggests that the survey results we have just presented do not adequately reveal how a major natural disaster can affect the organizational structure and political activity of a community. In order to explore this issue further, we chose to perform a more in depth analysis of the three communities in Potrerillos that experienced the greatest damage as a result of Mitch. The following section will present a brief historical review of these communities followed by an analysis of how Mitch has affected them.

Three Similar Yet Different Communities

Campo Garroba, Campo Blanco Cacerio and Higuerito Central were all located in the lowland region of Potrerillos when Mitch struck Honduras. They were located at different points along a narrow yet fertile strip of land located between the Blanco and Humuya Rivers. The proximity of these communities to these two rivers has made the land in and around where they once were located particularly fertile. Not surprisingly, this area has been the heart of agricultural production and economic activity in Potrerillos throughout the twentieth century.

During the 1940’s and early 1950’s the Tela Railroad Company purchased most of the fertile, lowland, valley land in Potrerillos. They founded Campo Garroba and Campo Blanco
Cacerio, converting both into banana cultivation camps. For several decades afterward, the people who lived in these two regions were housed primarily in wooden, single room barracks which were owned by the company. Higuerito Central was the managerial heart of the Tela Railroad Company’s operations in Potrerillos. It had been chosen as such because the tracks of the National Railroad which begin in the northern port of Puerto Cortés end at this site. The majority of the people who lived in these three areas during the later part of the twentieth century can best be described as rural proletariats.

The people who worked in these communities during the 1950’s and 1960’s had a strong sense of organization. In 1954, the workers from these areas participated in the biggest and longest strike in Honduran history. The strike was initiated by employees of the Tela Railroad Company, most of whom lived in the larger towns of La Lima, La Ceiba and Tela. Workers demanded six day work weeks, a limit on daily working hours, better wages, and fair treatment. The fervor of the movement quickly spread to other banana growing areas of the country. Strikers were eventually joined by students, intellectuals and other urban-based workers. Some of the older members from Potrerillos’ banana camps recall that after receiving news of this strike, men packed their knapsacks with food and, united in small groups, walked the two to three day journey to La Lime in order to be part of this momentous event.

The Worker’s Syndicate of the Tela Railroad Company (Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Tela Railroad Company or SITRATERCO) was created during the late 1950’s. All of the Tela’s employees instantly became members. At one point, Potrerillos had an estimated 10,000 workers in the lowland areas who were affiliated with the SITRATERCO. Most of these were concentrated in Campo Garroba, Campo Blanco Cacerio, Campo Bejuco and Higuerito Central. Some of the older residents of the area claim that the first generation of workers here were quite militant, as their participation in the 1954 strike reveals. However, this militancy appears to have declined sharply with the generation that succeeded them.

Not all of the people who lived in the banana camps of Potrerillos were employees of the Tela Railroad Company. A significant population of independent banana growers were located in the area also. All of them had at one time been employees of the Tela. During the early 1950’s the company began rewarding many of its best and oldest, senior level employees by granting them parcels of land in Potrerillos. Dozens of the company’s ex-employees benefited from this arrangement, as did the banana company. The latter gradually distanced itself from the cultivation of banana, leaving its ex-employees with the task of hiring, managing and paying the field workers required to grow and cut the fruit. Through such a move, the company freed itself of many of its labor problems. The laborers who went on to work for the independent banana growers were not organized into a labor union such as the SITRATERCO. Since each grower only hired about a dozen or so field workers, the latter remained divided and financially dependent on the whims of the former. The independent banana growers from the region did form their own organization; however, this association was very weak and had little real power when confronted with the Tela. The banana company bought all of the fruits produced by these growers at the prices it set. If the independent growers chose not to accept the prices set by the Tela, their fruits would usually rot in the fields. Tela’s main commitments to the banana growers was to spray their fields with

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pesticides, pack the fruit and transport it out of the region. In the early 1990’s, the company refused to even do that. It sold its packaging facilities and retreated from the region.

Although the people who lived in the banana camps of Potrerillos had some notable degree of organization as evidenced by the SITRATERCO and the independent banana growers’ association, this cooperative behavior did not spread to other aspects of community life here. In fact, if we exclude the SITRATERCO, community groups in these lowland regions appear to have been moderate to frail in strength. Some banana camps had *patronatos*, the name given to community level councils in Honduras. However, these were often inactive and at times even ceased to exist. Churches had little to no presence in these hard to reach areas. When people from these regions actually did unite for a common goal, they directed their protests and demands at the Tela Railroad Company, not the government. In part, this is due to the fact that the Honduran government has had little presence in these areas of its country. The Tela, therefore, was more then just an employer in these regions. It had become a mini state. It provided these areas with many of the services that usually belong to the purview of the government: they opened roads, installed water tanks, built houses and undertook other such infrastructure projects.

After the Tela retreated from this area in the early 1990’s, the independent banana growers experienced significant economic hardship. Some of them had jointly purchased the Tela’s old industrial facilities with a 15 million *lempira* bank loan. A fall in world banana prices during the early 1990’s however, reduced the group’s profits for several seasons and they soon defaulted on their loan. Several growers began selling their properties to a local sugar company in the mid 1990’s. Among the few independent growers that remained, half shifted to sugar cane production while the rest continued to cultivate banana. All of these events had the effect of weakening further the little organization that remained among the workers of the region.

The only banana camp where a significant amount of community organization still existed immediately before Mitch was Campo Blanco Cacerio. Yet, not all the members of this community were well organized. The banana camps in Blanco Cacerio had been abandoned by the Tela in the early 1990’s after a flood inundated most of the land there. The government had encouraged the families living there to relocate to a higher elevated part of the municipality by offering them free land. Although some families accepted this offer and moved, several others remained. Those that stayed in the camps remained scattered and unorganized.

A highly organized group of forty one families from Guaymas in the neighboring department of Yoro settled in Campo Blanco in 1997. The national government had given them over 100 hectares of land in the region. During the early 1970’s these families had been granted an almost equal quantity of land in Guaymas as part of the agrarian reform program. This land had not been awarded to peasants individually, but rather to the peasant associations to which they belonged. Unfortunately, like most beneficiaries of the agrarian reform program, these families had not been given legal title to their lands in Guaymas. In the mid-1990’s a consortia composed in part by the Tela Railroad Company claimed ownership of their land in Yoro. After a fierce legal battle, the government violently forced these people to evacuate their homes. Their agricultural lands which were then ripe for harvest were bulldozed, and the families were compensated for their loss with the highly flood prone land which the Tela had abandoned in
Campo Blanco Cacerio just a few years earlier. The forty one heads of families that arrived in Campo Blanco in 1997 were not the original beneficiaries of the agrarian reform program, but rather, the children of them. This made their experience with community solidarity and cooperation even stronger. As most of them proudly declared, “Nacimos en la organización” (We were born into organization). Not surprisingly, these newcomers to Potrerillos did not readily integrate themselves with the few families that were living in Campo Blanco when they arrived. They interacted little with these earlier settlers and thus managed to keep their previous social and organizational structure intact.

In the Summer of 1998, the land in Campo Blanco Cacerio was inundated by the normal rains of the season. Many of the original residents of the area were once again offered higher elevated land in the mountainous regions of Potrerillos. This offer was not extended to the new arrivals from Guaymas. Many of the older residents in Campo Blanco who still remained in the region agreed to move. Consequently, when Mitch pounded the region just a few months afterward, the forty one families from Guaymas were the main people residing in this area.

Disaster and its Aftermath

Mitch had a devastating effect on the rural, lowland communities of Potrerillos. The ceaseless, week-long rains which descended upon this region in late October of 1998 caused the Blanco and Humuya Rivers which surrounded them to break their banks and flood this entire area. No structure was left standing in Campo Blanco while only a few were spared from Higuerito Central and Campo Garroba. All three of these communities are currently living in shelters. The people from Higuerito Central are housed in 95 single room, nylon homes. The people from Campo Garroba are living in slightly over 100 such shelters while the families from Campo Blanco occupy 41 of them. The number of families in these shelters is slightly lower than the amount which resided in the banana camps before Mitch. Although no accurate statistical information is available, it appears as if several families have either moved to larger urban centers in the country or illegally migrated to the United States. In order to determine the long term organizational and political responses of these three communities to the Mitch-induced disaster, we once again relied heavily on survey information. Approximately half of the households from each of these three communities were selected to participate in this study. Our surveys were equally administered to men and women. The following information reflects the results of these survey responses.

Campo Blanco Cacerio

As was described earlier, the families currently housed in the shelter community of Campo Blanco have a historic experience with organizations. When we asked those who participated in our sample whether they belonged to any church or group from their community, all of the men and 80% of the women responded affirmatively. More interestingly, all of them belong to non-religious organizations. All of the men are members of a peasant organization. The women are either members of peasant associations or of women’s groups. Not surprisingly, a majority of the people we surveyed from this area believe that the level of organization in their community was
strong before Mitch and continues to remain so today. Nearly half said it was now easier to work with others in the community while a quarter said it is the same as before.

Qualitative research with these disaster victims seems to support the notion that their level of organization has become even stronger now than it was before Mitch. In the aftermath of Mitch, the Christian Organization for Integral Development of Honduras (Organización Cristiana de Desarrollo Integral de Honduras, OCDIH), a local non-governmental organization (NGO) encouraged the females in the community to form a women’s group. They readily accepted the idea and instead of forming just one such organization, decided to establish two. As of early February 2000 these groups were in the process of forming animal corrals where they could feed and store both chickens and pigs.

The community’s organization has also been strengthened through the formation of a new patronato. As was mentioned earlier, patronatos are community level councils of representatives. The 1992 Law of Municipalities recognizes patronatos as the legal, political representatives of their community before the municipal and national government. Soon after settling in their current shelters, the members of all of the peasant organizations in the community, most of whom are men, had a meeting in which they decided to form a patronato. Unlike, the women’s groups, the idea to form this organization came from community members themselves and not from external agents. Apparently, no patronato had existed in Campo Blanco for almost a decade before Mitch. The members of this newly formed group are essentially the same as those that compose the peasant organizations in the community. The difference between both organizations is that the latter function independently of one another in order to represent the needs and interest of its members while the former represents the interests of the community as a whole. It is important to emphasis that the patronato of Campo Blanco does not merely exist in name, as do so many other ones in the country. The group meets frequently, has a good community turnout and allows attendees to express their opinions and make decisions.

The disaster provoked by Mitch seems to have strengthened the political engagement of the inhabitants of Campo Blanco. None of the people we surveyed from this community had ever attended a cabildo abierto before Mitch. However, approximately a quarter of them, all men,
attended such an event in the aftermath of this disaster. Our study participants also reveal a noticeable increase in their level of contact with the government. A little less than a third of our survey sample said they had contacted a government official at least once before Mitch. Over half engaged in this sort of political activity after this event. In both time periods, men have been the ones who have predominantly engaged in this type of political activity.

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The members of Campo Blanco explained that in the months following Mitch they contacted several government representatives in order to find some resolution to their land needs. Most frequently, they turned to the municipality for help; however, they also attempted to contact ministers and other lower level bureaucrats. Upon seeing that the government gave no concrete response to their needs, the members of this community decided to adopt more forceful political action. In September of 1999 the members of this community took possession of the only road that connects the capital of Tegucigalpa to San Pedro Sula, the second largest city in the country. Every member of the community participated in this public protest, including women and children.

The political pressure employed by this community, though risky, had significant payoffs. Just days after the road bloc had been initiated, the minister of the Technical Secretariat for International Cooperation (*Secretaria Técnica de Cooperación Internacional, SETCO*) arrived in the region to analyze the situation of these disaster victims. This minister forms part of the president’s Special Cabinet for Reconstruction, and is responsible for securing all international donations. A few days later, the Minister of the Presidency, the president’s right hand man, asked the community of Campo Blanco Cacerio to send a small delegation to Tegucigalpa to meet with him. They did so. Approximately fifteen days after the road takeover, the members of this community received a check worth 300,000 *lempiras* enabling them to purchase the land on which to build new homes. The members of the community are in the midst of building concrete houses for all of the families in the community. They expect to have their houses completed by late March or early April 2000.
Despite the apparently dramatic increase in political participation among the members of this community, their commitment to vote in elections has declined. Eighty percent of those we surveyed claim they have voted at least once in the past. However, respondents are equally split as to whether they should vote in the next election: a third say they will, a third say they will not and another third say they are undecided. The dubiousness regarding voting can in large part be explained by the community’s past experiences with the government. They all expressed a strong amount of resentment for being forcibly kicked out of their homes in Guaymas and relocated to the “duck pond” known as Campo Blanco. They are also unhappy about the fact that they had to adopt public protest measures in order to obtain post-disaster assistance from the government. Most of those we interviewed say that these experiences have made them doubt whether voting makes any real difference for the poor. The government, they say, doesn’t seem to listen to them in any case. They now believe that the government will respond to the needs of people like them only when force or public protest is employed.

The case of Campo Blanco reveals a socio-political response to disaster that is quite different from what we discovered through our municipal-level survey data. The families from this community seem to have been well organized before Mitch. The recent disaster in the area has apparently strengthened that process. Moreover given the fact we are analyzing this community almost a year and a half after the initial flood impact, it appears as if the heightened level of organization here represents a long term change. It also appears as if Mitch has encouraged community members to become more politically active. Interestingly, there was a low to moderate level of political participation in this community before Mitch, despite the strong civic culture that existed there. The disaster seems to have altered this pattern. When I asked one community member what he thought accounted for this change in political behavior, he responded that Mitch accounted for 80% of it and his community’s organization for the other 20%. We can only guess as to whether his assessment of this situation is correct.

Higuerito Central

The community of Higuerito Central stands in sharp contrast to the one in Campo Blanco Cacerio. The families in this community had no organization immediately before Mitch, not even a patronato. The surveys we conducted in the community seem to reflect this. Over half of the people we consulted from here said that no organizations existed in their community before Mitch while another 20% said that their community organization was weak. We then asked members whether they had belonged to any church or community group during the pre-disaster period. One fifth of our survey sample answered affirmatively: all of them had been members of a local evangelical church. The church was the only form of organization which existed in Higuerito Central before
the disaster. However, this church did not encourage its members to engage actively in community affairs, as our survey results indicate. It limited itself to preaching the word of God.

The natural disaster that afflicted this community in late 1998 seems to have contributed to its organization. Almost half of those surveyed believe that their community now has an active level of organization while over a fifth believe it is moderate. Forty one percent of our respondents say it is now easier to work with other members of the community compared to the pre-disaster period. In order to test the vibrancy of the organizational life in Higuerito Central, we asked our survey participants whether any of them belonged to a church or community group now. A third responded that they did. None of them, moreover, are members of a church. The evangelical church that existed in the community before Mitch ceased to function as a result of the disaster. Therefore, the third of our sample that is now organized belongs to one of the many groups that have been established in Higuerito Central after Mitch. Six new groups have been established in the community after the disaster. These include health, cleaning, vigilance, and water committees; patronato; a women’s group and a police auxiliary committee.

Although Mitch appears to have sparked a dramatic and positive organizational response to disaster in Higuerito Central, there is reason to question this conclusion. To begin with, none of the new groups that currently exist in the community were endogenously formed. All were established due to some external intervention. In addition, most of these groups have been in existence for four months or less. During the year or so after Mitch, Higuerito Central had no community organization except for a patronato. In order to understand better why there has been a sudden surge in the associational life of the community, we must explore more deeply what transpired here during late 1998 and 1999.

During the immediate, post-disaster period, the families in Higuerito Central experienced a rise in solidarity and cooperation, as the disaster literature would predict. Neighbors worked together to ensure each other’s basic needs and to rescue from their community what few possessions they could. In December of 1998, almost a month after Mitch, several men from the community had a meeting and decided that they had to organize in order to confront the post-disaster challenges they faced. They chose to form a relocation committee and assigned themselves the task of searching for external assistance for both relocation and their other myriad needs. That same month, the mayor of Potrerillos told community members that they had to form a patronato in order to officially represent the community before the government and other donor agencies. Soon afterward, an ex-member of the patronato from Campo Garroba and friend of the mayor’s approached the families in Higuerito Central and reiterated that they should form a
**patronato.** He had apparently been asked by the mayor to help organize this community. The families from Higuerito Central seemed receptive to the idea of a *patronato.* In January 1999 a community meeting was held in order to elect the heads of said organization. Accounts differ as to how many people actually attended this meeting. Some say that only about 20 community members were present, while others say that almost the whole community appeared. What is clear is that only one individual was proposed for each of the four leadership positions in the *patronato.* None of them had lived in Higuerito Central before Mitch. The former member of the *patronato* in Garroba was elected president of this new organization.

The newly formed *patronato* appears to have killed whatever associational spirit had arisen in the community during November and December of 1998. The job of contacting politicians and donors for help was placed in the hands of this organization’s new leaders. There seemed little reason for the relocation committee to continue existing. Only a month after this group had been formed, it ceased to exist. The leaders of the new *patronato* apparently were not very militant, and the president limited himself to dealing almost exclusively with the municipality. The other members of the community, having received the government’s promise that they would be relocated to new and permanent homes in less than eighteen months, decided to just be patient and wait for the promised aid to arrive. In the meantime, the sugar cane growers in Higuerito Central began replanting their fields and demanding labor. As the men from the community returned to their traditional, back breaking jobs, people began to focus more on their individual, family needs. Eventually, most of the families from here resettled the land between the Humuya and Blanco Rivers. These areas, though flood prone, were closer to the cane fields and had easy access to water. Thus, just a few months after Mitch, the families from Higuerito Central had relapsed into their individualistic and disorganized, pre-disaster pattern of social behavior.

During the Summer of 1999 the heavy rains once again flooded the lowland regions of Potrerillos, sparking yet another local disaster. All the families from Higuerito Central had to be evacuated from these areas once again and housed in shelters. Soon afterward, these disaster victims were supplied with the materials they needed to build single room, nylon shelters. They were instructed to build these structures in a higher elevated area of Potrerillos just a few kilometers away from their original home sites. They were told that they would eventually build their permanent homes in these area. They only needed to wait for the national government to give them the money they needed to purchase this property and obtain legal titles to it. In the meantime, these families were prohibited from constructing houses in the lowland areas.

When the families from Campo Blanco Cacerio decided to take over the road from San Pedro Sula to Tegucigalpa in demand of government assistance, they asked the families from Higuerito Central to join their protest. The people from Higuerito Central refused, fearing that there would be some negative repercussions from the government. Instead, they decided to wait patiently until they were offered the assistance they had been promised months earlier. When the Minister of SETCO arrived in Potrerillos just days after the road bloc orchestrated by Campo Blanco, he also made a brief visit to the shelter communities in Campo Garroba and Higuerito Central. Both of these shelters were then less a month old. When the minister arrived in the Higuerito Central shelter, he seemed surprised to discover the little that had been done to secure permanent home sites for these families. The minister told the community that they should have
requested assistance from him months earlier. When Campo Blanco received a check from the
government less than a month after their road blockade, the residents from Higuerito Central
became convinced that those who are organized and mobilize in search of help, receive it.

The second wave of floods in 1999, the visit from the minister of SETCO and the
experience of Campo Blanco all seem to have injected the community of Higuerito Central with a
new willingness to cooperate and work together. However, the organization that currently exists
among these families did not arise automatically after these events. Local NGOs and the
municipality actively intervened to organize this community. The Red Cross trained four people
here in first aid and several others on how to manage the water pump they had donated to the
them. They thus helped create a health and water committee. The Red Cross and the
municipality also ordered the members of the community to form a sanitation committee in order
to regularly clean and pick up litter in the shelter site. OCDIH, another NGO in Potrerillos,
encouraged women to form corrals and begin growing pigs and chickens. Lastly, the municipality
asked the men in the community to form a vigilance committee in order to prevent robberies and
an auxiliary committee in order to aid the local police. The later is in charge of arresting people in
cases of drunken behavior, domestic violence, or other criminal offenses.

Attended a Cabildo Before Mitch

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Attended a Cabildo After Mitch

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The relatively recent appearance of the previously mentioned organizations in Higuerito
Central has not had a clear or direct effect on the political activism of the community. People’s
participation in *cabildos abiertos*, for example, has slightly declined in the aftermath of the
disaster. Approximately 12% of those we surveyed indicated that they had attended such and
event before Mitch while less than 10% said they had done so after the storm. The level of
contact between politicians and community members, on the other hand, seems to have increased
slightly. About 16% of those we surveyed said they had contacted a government official at least
once before Mitch. In the aftermath of disaster, this type of political action has risen four
percentage points. This slight increase is mainly explained by the fact that some politicians such
as the mayor and the minister from SETCO have visited this shelter and spoken to people there in
the aftermath of Mitch. The actual contact being initiated by members of this community,
however, remains unaltered. The community’s commitment to voting reveals the greatest
percentage increase. Almost three quarters of those we surveyed had voted at least once in the last four elections. Now, 98% of our sample says that they will vote in the next general election. Like the population of Potrerillos more generally, most of these people explained they have voted in the past and expect to do so again because they perceive it as their duty.

The case of Higuerito Central presents us with a rich yet somewhat complex scenario of how disasters may affect community organizations and political activity. In many ways, the families from Higuerito Central seem to have followed a pattern of behavior consistent with what the disaster literature would predict. In the immediate aftermath of Mitch there was a heightened sense of solidarity among them which lead to the emergence of a new organization. However, the new group quickly disappeared and the community relapsed into its pre-impact divisiveness during the early part of 1999. The second onslaught of floods in September of that year and the lessons they learned from their neighbors in Campo Blanco seem to have encouraged this community to organize again. However, it is possible that families from Higuerito Central never would have united and formed new groups as they have now had local NGOs and the mayor not suggested they do so. It would appear that the second onslaught of disaster, the minister’s visit and the experience of Campo Blanco made the members of this community more receptive to the idea of organizing and thus facilitated the efforts that external forces were making to promote this outcome.

Campo Garroba

The community of Campo Garroba was neither as organized as those families from Campo Blanco nor as disorganized as those from Higuerito Central. Campo Garroba had a patronato and an evangelical church in its community before Mitch. However, the patronato was very frail, almost inactive. When we asked our survey participants to describe the nature of their community’s organization before the Mitch-induced floods, over a third said that it was weak while another fifth said that it had been moderate in strength. It appears as if the families from
Campo Garroba are now slightly more organized than in the past, as the two diagrams above reveal. The percentage of people who think that their community’s organization is active has increased after Mitch while the amount who thought that the organization here was weak has declined. In order to verify just how organized the community is now, we asked our survey participants whether they were members of any church or group. Forty two percent of our respondents answered affirmatively. About half of these are members of church organizations while the rest claim to belong to other community groups. Interestingly, almost the same new groups that have recently emerged in Higuerito Central have also been created in Campo Garroba. This community has committees that oversee health, sanitation, water, and security issues. Like in Higuerito Central, these groups have all been formed after September 1999 as a result of external intervention.

Despite certain similarities, the organizational response of this community to the post-disaster period differs somewhat from what occurred in Higuerito Central. Immediate after Mitch the community experienced a heightened level of solidarity and cooperation. However, unlike Higuerito Central, no new group emerged here during the emergency period. The disaster merely reactivated the patronato that already existed here. By early 1999 most of the families in Campo Garroba tried to return to a somewhat normal pattern of life. The men began working again in the banana and sugar cane fields. About half of the families from this community decided to relocate to the original site of their town. Some rebuilt their houses there while others repaired the few living structures that had been left standing. Since the other families remained in shelters, it is probable that the spatial division of this community prevented greater unity among them or new groups from arising. The task of solving the community’s relocation problems were left in the hands of the patronato. Garroba’s patronato seemed to be much more belligerent than the one from Higuerito Central. The president of this organization sought help from the municipality, congressmen, ministers, judges and lower level bureaucrats—basically from anyone and everyone who could assist her and her community. However, this patronato and the community in general choose not to adopt the public protest methods that were undertaken by those in Campo Blanco. Instead, the leaders of the community decided to solicit government help through standard, often highly clientelistic, channels of political authority.
When the September 1999 floods arrived, about half of the families from this community had already built their shelters in the area where the entire community now resides. The fact that some families from Garroba were more settled into the area than others seems to have facilitated cooperation among them. Neighbors helped each other build their new shelters and rescue pieces of construction material and personal belongings from their previous settlement site. Together, both male and female community members helped build a church and school/meeting area for the community. They also moved heavy rocks in order to make stone paths through the mountainous area where they had been relocated. These self-motivated examples of collective behavior had also been present in Campo Blanco but absent in Higuerito Central. It appears as if the pre-disaster experience with organizations helped both of these communities unite more easily with one another in order to solve the community’s post-disaster needs.

The increased level of cooperation and revived associational life in Campo Garroba seems to have caused a slight increase in the community’s level of political participation. Only 3.6% of the members of this community had attended a cabildo abierto before Mitch. In the aftermath of the disaster, that figure has more than tripled to 11%. Although the community’s participation in these types of political gatherings still remains feeble, the post-disaster increased attendance in these gatherings is noteworthy.

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<td>Yes</td>
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Our other indicators of political participation also reveal that the people from Campo Garroba have become more politically active. For example, only about one eighth of the people we interviewed from this shelter community said that they had contacted a government official before Mitch. In the aftermath of this disaster, that figure has doubled to almost a quarter. The community’s commitment to vote has remained constant. Only 5% of our survey respondents reported that they had not voted in any of the past four elections. The same percentage of people refuse to vote again in the future. In both time periods, however, the community’s voting participation seems remarkably high.
Campo Garroba’s organizational and political response to disaster shares some of the characteristics of both Campo Blanco and Higuerito Central. After an initial, post-disaster period of heightened solidarity, the level of cooperation among the members of this community declined. This may have in part been due to the fact that the families of this community were divided into two separate locations during much of 1999. As occurred in Higuerito Central, community solidarity resurfaced here after the second flood in September 1999. Although new organizations have emerged in the community in large part due to the suggestions and assistance of outside forces, the families in Campo Garroba revealed a high degree of solidarity and cooperation that was independent of such foreign interference. This is best exemplified by the stone paths, church and school that community members built with their own initiative. All of this leads us to conclude that despite the compound disaster experience shared by both Higuerito Central and Campo Garroba, the later responded to these events with a more vibrant and associational life than the former. The community of Campo Garroba, moreover, has participated more actively in politics than it did during the pre-disaster period. In this sense, this community appears to be more similar to Campo Blanco than to Higuerito Central.

Conclusion

How does a disaster affect the organizational and political activity of a community? In order to answer this question it appears that one must begin by defining what a disaster-stricken community is. Our preceding analysis revealed that despite being devastated by the Mitch, the municipality of Potrerillos may not qualify as such a community—at least not for the purposes of this investigation—because over half of its residents experienced no significant personal damage as a result of the floods. Not surprisingly, our quantitative analysis of this municipality revealed no noticeable socio-political response to disaster among residents of Potrerillos.

When we narrowed our focus and concentrated more specifically on those three communities where all the families suffered major or total loss in the floods, our study discovered a very different and dynamic reaction to disaster. Survey data from Campo Blanco, Campo Garroba and Higuerito Central reveal that all three areas have developed a more vibrant associational life in the post disaster period. Campo Blanco appears to have been organizationally
strong before Mitch and has continued to remain so afterward. Our qualitative data on Campo Garroba and Higuerito Central reveal that both experienced a decline in solidarity and cooperation soon after the emergency period ended. The associational spirit of these two communities was only reactivated once a second flood assaulted them. Their response to this second disaster was not identical. New groups were formed in Higuerito Central only when external forces intervened to both verbally encourage and directly help the residents form them. Although foreign agents also helped establish new associations in Campo Garroba, the residents from this community adopted additional, group initiatives independently of outsiders. This differential response to disaster is not surprising given the pre-disaster level of organization in each of these communities.

The theoretical literature in political science had led us to surmise that if a disaster-stricken community experiences an improvement in its associational life, it should also experience a concomitant increase in its political participation. This suspicion is supported by at least two of our communities. The families from Campo Garroba have augmented their attendance in cabildos abiertos and now have greater contact with their political representatives. They have also participated in public protests during the aftermath of Mitch, something they had not done previously. All of this suggests that their strengthened organizational life has resulted in greater political activism during the post-disaster period. Although, their willingness to vote seems to have declined slightly, this behavior is easily explained by the negative relationship this community has had with the government during the last five years. The residents in Campo Garroba also reveal an increase in political activism. Their political activism, however, has not grown as markedly as it has among the residents in Campo Blanco and still remains quite meager. This is not surprising given the fact that the community organization of Campo Garroba, though significantly strengthened after the second flood disaster, is still new and more fragile than the one that exists in Campo Blanco.

The case of Higuerito Central does not support the idea that a heightened sense of civic engagement will result in an increased level of political participation after a disaster. The people we surveyed from this community reported a two percentage point decrease in their attendance at cabildos and a four percentage point increase in their degree of contact with government representatives after Mitch. The slight variation in these responses suggests that this community's participation in politics remains relatively unaltered, at least with regard to these two issues. Their desire to vote, however, seems to have increased noticeably in the aftermath of Mitch. None of these political participation measures indicate that the recent rise in Higuerito Central's associational life has caused an increase in political participation. The results, however, do not disconfirm our earlier suspicion. Although several new groups have emerged in Higuerito Central in the last four months and several members of the community seem to be participating in them, all of these have been externally imposed. They did not arise naturally from within the community. Moreover all of the organizations that currently exist in the community are, like many of the ones in Campo Garroba, both new and weak. It would seem that a tradition of civic associations needs to be more firmly implanted in a community for the skills acquired in these organizations to be transferred to the arena of politics.

It is still uncertain whether the heightened level of community organization we have witnessing in Campo Blanco, Campo Garroba and Higuerito Central represent transitory
responses to disaster or more enduring ones. It is possible that the behavior we have observed in Campo Blanco will persist well into the future, given the fact that year and a half has passed since these families endured the devastation of a major natural disaster. Yet, such a conclusion can only be reached if their current behavior persists even after this community has settled permanently into their new homes. The patterns of behavior we have reported from Campo Garroba and Higuerito Central may be more fleeting since only six months have transpired since these communities suffered the consequences of a second major flood. A longitudinal study of all three communities is required in order to make any assessments about the long-term impacts of Mitch.

Although the research results we have presented here have several temporal limitations, we hope it has helped expand our understanding of people’s socio-political responses to disaster situations.