

BOOK REVIEW

Desastres Naturales en América Latina José Lugo-Hubp and
Moshe Inbar, Compilers, Fondo de Cultura Económica,
México, 501 pp. ISBN 968-16-6400-0 Venezuelan Bs.
29.000, approx. US\$ 17.00, Hardbound, (In Spanish)

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This book is a compilation of papers on natural disasters in Latin America ranging in time from 1578—with an account of the El Niño phenomenon in northern Peru (citing documents from 1585 and 1590)—to 1999—with a paper on the most recent and worst hydrometeorological disaster that affected northern central Venezuela in December 1999.

The book is beautifully edited and printed but it is a pity that the excellent illustrations, very clear and well selected, are all in black and white. A bit of color would have enriched this book immensely

After an introduction by the compilers, the book presents a total of 21 papers by 48 authors on volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, droughts, forest fires, hurricanes, floods, and mass movements in: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Peru, Venezuela,

An interesting—and novel—aspect of this book is that it presents a mix of well known and extensively written about natural disasters (e.g. the 1985 Mexico City earthquake; the 1985 Nevado del Ruiz volcanic eruption; the Popocatepetl saga; the “La Josefina”, Ecuador 1993 landslide; hurricane Mitch of 1998); alongside a sampling of natural disasters not very well known and generally ignored by researches and authors (e.g. the Argentinean pampas droughts of 1995; hurricane Flora that hit Cuba in 1963; the 1982/1983 floods in the Argentinean side of the Paraná river); and the 1987 hydrometeorological disaster in Rio Limon, Venezuela; among others.)

The authorship of these articles shows a majority of physical and natural scientists over social scientists, a reflection, perhaps, of the prevalence of the amount of recent research carried out in the region in the “hard” sciences in detriment of the “soft” sciences. Fortunately, this situation has tended to improve in recent years, thanks in part to the efforts of entities such as LaRed and CIESAS.

The book shows, in this reviewer’s opinion, an unbalance in favor of Mexico, both in the number of papers, 10 of 25 (40%) and in the number of authors: 21 of 48 authors (44%). This fact can perhaps be explained by the fact that the book was published in Mexico by a Mexican editorial house and compiled by a Mexican and an Israeli-born resident of Mexico since 1987.

This reviewer notices the fact that, for unknown reasons, natural disasters in the Caribbean are not included, except for a paper on hurricane Flora that caused considerable damage in Cuba in 1963. This is quite peculiar, given that the Caribbean region is impacted every year by a number of tropical storms and hurricanes, many of them destructive, as well as, periodically, by earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, floods, mass movements, floods and droughts.

In its introduction, and before going into specific case studies, the authors reiterate the well known fact that the negative effects of disasters are felt most in the most vulnerable countries, i.e. those countries euphemistically termed ‘developing countries’ which are, for practical purposes poor and underdeveloped. These countries, I am sorry to say, do not have a very bright future from the point of view of viable disaster reduction unless special emphasis is placed on solving poverty and underdevelopment before (or at the same time) as attempting to facilitate natural disaster reduction. Sustainable development is an essential prerequisite for successful natural disaster risk reduction protects.

This is one of a number of books on natural disasters in Latin America that have been published in Spanish in recent years; a very welcome trend that somewhat compensates for the absence of literature on this subject in this part of the world. What is now needed is the adequate English translation of this and other books on the same subject in order to make Latin American and Caribbean efforts to reduce vulnerability to natural disaster risks better known in the rest of the world, which shares many similar problems.