
Venezuela: Are "natural disasters" only natural?

In December 1999 ravaging storms, floods and landslides caused the tragic death of more than 30,000 people and the loss of houses, belongings and livelihoods of many other Venezuelans. Such terrible loss of human lives, crops, livestock and infrastructure can be seen as a misfortune provoked by the fury of nature. Nevertheless, as usually happens in the so called "natural disasters", there is a human-induced component, whose importance is in most cases not taken into account.

Torrential rains constitute a non periodic -unpredictable- phenomenon in the Central Mountain Range (Cordillera Central) region of Venezuela. The first register of such type of rain in La Guaira dates from 1780, and Alexander von Humboldt, during his visit to that country, reported an extraordinary pouring rain in November 1799. Similar registers were taken during the 19th and 20th centuries.

Nevertheless, damages caused by the floods of the rivers Guaire, Chichiriviche, Baruta, Los Teques, Cúpira, Tuy, Limón, Cabrales and Chuao were not proportional to the rainfall intensity but to the state of their respective watersheds. In fact, the consequences of this kind of events depend both on their intensity and on the vulnerability of the affected territory.

In this case, continuous deforestation and forest fires in the high watershed areas had created the conditions for the destructive effect of pouring rains, and an uncontrolled runoff literally swept the soil and everything that was on its surface, provoking enormous landslides that buried entire territories. This brought death and suffering to many people, mostly poor, who are the ones that generally occupy the areas most vulnerable to natural phenomena.

The unpredictable changes that are affecting the climate at the global level -mainly due to an unsustainable production and consumption style- pose enormous threats at the regional and local levels. To put the blame on "El Niño" -and now on "La Niña"- is not only a mistake, but a great irresponsibility regarding the future of life on Earth. Pouring rains in the Central Mountain Range of Venezuela are expected to become more and more intense in the coming years as a consequence of climate change. If the repetition of the tragic consequences experienced by the Venezuelan people last December is to be avoided in the future, then the solution is to take preventive measures, the main ones being to halt deforestation and to assist in the rehabilitation of forests, particularly in the most environmentally sensitive areas. Only then will the environment be again able to minimize the impacts of natural phenomena as it did in the past.

Source: Héctor Bello Silva, 2/2/2000;