Preventing displacement

The Law was the result of a national consensus among various stakeholders such as the government, Congress, political parties, human rights organisations and victims' organisations. It promotes a model that aims to break the cycle of victimisation and start a process of empowerment instead. The solutions envisioned under the law include promoting the active participation of victims in the design and implementation of the law, accompanying and assisting victims in establishing livelihoods, and supporting victim networks and initiatives. According to the law, respect for the dignity of the victims, their aspirations and stories should prevail in the process of participation – which in turn contributes to empowerment and confidence building. While the process is still unfolding, the willingness to allow wide and equal participation of community members is a good platform for re-building community trust. Reconciliation among community members and public faith in the process will require continued engagement of all stakeholders.

A significant challenge for the implementation of this project is the sheer volume of claims. As of November 2012, the government has witnessed more than 25,000 claims for a total of over two million hectares of land. There is little doubt that this process will require a significant amount of dedicated resources over a long period of time. Nevertheless, progress is slowly visible. In the community of Manpujan, for example, people are beginning to feel empowered to act on their claims of ownership and are contesting more than 2,000 prior judicial decisions against their land ownership claims; this has led so far to the restitution of fourteen properties. These outcomes are small but significant victories for people dispossessed of their land.

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Natural disasters and indigenous displacement in Bolivia

Ludvik Girard

In Bolivia not only have recent natural disasters been the worst ever but structural patterns related to the rural agricultural sector and climate change have combined to make climate-related displacement significant. The three most affected areas are the east where the weather cycles in the Amazon basin have been profoundly disturbed, the south where there has been increasing desertification, and the north where the temperatures in the Andes mountains have been undergoing rapid change. Bolivia’s large indigenous population (proportionally the highest in any Latin American country at 62%) is largely dependent on agriculture and therefore particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change.

In all of these regions, agricultural production has been increasingly changing in character and in many cases these changes are undermining the capacity for local subsistence. Traditional methods of agricultural activity are based on traditional knowledge that is not adapted to the new climatic cycles. In addition these communities tend to be remote and with less access to political levers. The result is that growing numbers of people are forced to migrate, generally into towns and cities.

On the positive side, the Bolivian government has a commitment to the rights of indigenous people, as well as an awareness of the role of ecological issues. This commitment was confirmed by the World People’s Conference on Climate Change and Rights of Mother Earth in April 2010 which produced concrete proposals for political action and international agreements.

To deal with the very real problems of indigenous migration, a sociological and technical enquiry is needed, seeking feasible solutions and feeding into public debates. Such an investigation must be participative and focus on migration as an adaptive strategy. It should seek to identify those aspects of traditional knowledge that might support efforts to overcome technical difficulties, and should systematically profile the resilience and limitations of each indigenous community.

If it does this, it will shed light on an aspect of risk management that receives relatively little attention, and potentially help prevent the displacement of indigenous people as a result of climate change.

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The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of IOM.

1. Conferencia Mundial de Pueblos sobre el Cambio Climático y los Derechos de la Madre Tierra http://pwccc.wordpress.com/