

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 2010¹ 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.

Ludvik Girard ludvik.girard@gmail.com has been working as a consultant to IOM Bolivia <http://tinyurl.com/IOM-Bolivia>
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/>