



## **Natural hazards and decision-making in the most densely populated country in the American continent: a 20-year perspective**

Celina Cruz Martínez (1) and Jose Cepeda (2)

(1) Oficina de Planificación del Área Metropolitana de San Salvador (OPAMSS), San Salvador, El Salvador (celina.cruz@opamss.org.sv, +503 22340614), (2) Norwegian Geotechnical Institute (NGI), Oslo, Norway (Jose.Cepeda@ngi.no, +47 22230448)

With a population density of  $\sim 300$  per  $\text{km}^2$ , El Salvador is the most densely populated country in the American continent and the capital, San Salvador, is probably the city in the Americas most frequently hit by natural hazards, earthquakes in particular. As a consequence of a magnitude 5.4 earthquake in 1986, 1500 people were killed, with as many as one-third of these casualties associated to the collapse of engineered structures, a high rate compared to contemporary figures worldwide. Four years earlier, during a long precipitation period in September 1982, a debris flow was triggered from the summit of the San Salvador volcano and travelled  $\sim 4$  km for about one hour before it killed up to 500 people in an area to the North-West of the Metropolitan Area of San Salvador (AMSS). This same area had been previously hit by a similar event 50 years earlier, but with no consequences at that time since it was uninhabited. These are only some examples of the main facts that motivated the creation of the Office for Urban Planning of the Metropolitan Area of San Salvador (OPAMSS) in 1990. This institution is an autonomous municipal organisation whose functions and attributes comprise the planning and control of urban development. After 20 years of the foundation of OPAMSS, this paper presents its history and evolution, the main achievements and challenges, focusing on how the institution has been shaped by some key milestones, such as the earthquake-triggered landslide at Las Colinas neighbourhood in January 2001, which killed  $\sim 600$  people in the Western AMSS, and the widespread flooding in October 2005 after the urban drainage network collapsed during Hurricane Stan. The development of OPAMSS as a key organisation in land use management and decision-making is an example that illustrates how the integration of technical and legal aspects can be oriented towards the improvement of governance at the scale of metropolitan areas.