



The role of social and economic context, and local knowledge for post-disaster reconstruction of high-mountain hazards: a case study from the Peruvian Andes

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Following the occurrence of an extreme event, specific and immediate actions are oriented to relieve basic needs and guarantee the subsistence of daily life. One of the priorities is focused on the reconstruction and relocation to areas away from possible hazard. However, on a long-term perspective, new contexts, concerns and priorities among the affected as well as the immigrated population foster new risk perceptions, which in many cases may include the returning or settlement in areas exposed to hazards.

In Santa Teresa (Cusco, Peru), risk has been part of its history. In 1998, two very large debris flows from deglaciated areas, in January and February respectively, destroyed the old city located by the riverside of the Sacsara river; including the loss of lives, housing, loss of infrastructure and roads, electricity and water cuts, among other important losses. Today, the new city is located on a terrace above the river reach; and their current inhabitants, mainly migrants from different cities of the region of Cusco, have a different perspective of this experience.

On the contrary, many of the inhabitants who experienced these events have returned to the risk areas where they lost everything, or they have settled in disaster prone areas. There is a set of factors, such as local knowledge (regarding space, economy, etc.) and new social contexts (such as the rise of tourism in risk areas, for example) that are implicit in the current narratives regarding hazard and risk.

This work purposes the following questions: how does the social and economic context, as well as local knowledge influence risk perceptions? Are there any differences concerning risk perceptions between groups who decided to live in disaster prone areas and groups who are less exposed to risk? And which are the strategies within the groups regarding risk, considering how this concept is understood among them?

In order to analyze these questions, this work is based on a case study in the Salkantay catchments, one of the five catchments of Santa Teresa district that was most affected by the debris flows. The case study was carried out applying ethnographic methods with a 3-month fieldwork in the area. The results show that settlement in disaster prone areas respond to priorities such as the increment of touristic services, the lack of land security, the accessibility to farms, among other factors. Moreover, even physical risks are not the main core of the inhabitants' concerns, they are triggering other types of risks, which are object of local strategies and organization.

Thus, this study seeks to highlight the importance of incorporating cultural and social contextualization into post-disaster recovery and the process of reconstruction, especially in a long-term perspective of risk reduction efforts. Moreover, this aims to contribute to a wider understanding of risks from local perspectives and local knowledge.