GIS for Urban Disaster Management

Facing the Unexpected

Urban areas are particularly vulnerable not only because of the concentration of population, but also due to the interplay that exists between people, buildings, and technological systems.

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Natural disasters are the impact of a natural hazard upon a vulnerable community resulting in disruption, damage and casualties that cannot be relieved by the unaided capacity of locally-mobilised resources (United Nations Disaster Relief Coordinator 1991). In addition to their direct social and economic impact, natural disasters affect employment, the balance of trade, and foreign indebtedness for years after their occurrence, and funds intended for development are often diverted into costly relief efforts (Organization of American States, 1990). Unfortunately, as pointed out by Mitchell (1999), until very recently, disaster management and long term development tended to be seen as distinct entities instead of inextricably linked and part of the same ongoing process.

It has been estimated that per capita losses of the GNP in developing countries are 20 times greater than in the developed countries (Clarke and Munasinghe, 1994). The greater losses to natural disasters in the developing world highlight differences in terms of the weakness of the economies, the perception of people towards natural disasters and inadequate disaster management.

By concentrating into small areas, the bigger interplay between the different urban elements that exists creates higher damage indices compared with the same elements widely spread in a rural environment. For this reason, more than ever before, the issues of planning and disaster management are high on urban agendas.

Methodological Issues

Disaster management should consist of an orgnised effort to mitigate against, prepare for, respond to, and recover from a disaster (Federal Emergency Management Agency, National Emergency Training Center et al., 1998). Mitigation is two-fold: it aims to prevent losses from occurring in undeveloped land (prevention) and to lower the expected losses in existing buildings and other structures (reduction). Examples of mitigation mechanisms include land-use regulations, engineering works, building codes, and insurance programs. Preparedness consists of planning how to respond in case an emergency or disaster occurs and working to increase resources available to respond effectively. Preparedness activities include contingency planning, resource management, mutual aid and cooperative agreements with other jurisdictions and response agencies, public information, and the training of response personnel. Response refers activities that occur...
during and immediately following a disaster. It is designed to provide emergency assistance to victims of the event and reduce the likelihood of secondary damage. Response activities include search and rescue, evacuation, emergency medical services, fire-fighting as well as reduction of the likelihood of secondary damage such as to the contents of damaged buildings. Recovery constitutes the final phase of the disaster management cycle and it continues until all systems return to normal or near normal. Recovery activities include temporary housing, restoration of basic services (i.e. water, electricity), food and clothing, debris clearance, psychological counselling, job assistance, and loans to restart small businesses.

To some extent, the task of scientists, geo-information technicians and urban planners relates to the gathering of data, its processing and presentation to allow a series of successive questions to be answered. It therefore involves an understanding of the processes that lead to the disaster, both in terms of the phenomenon itself, and its impact on a community and to the production of relevant information to assist decision-making.

The first question in this sequence is: what is the risk? In other words, what would be the expected in terms of human, property and production losses if the hazard scenario or scenarios presented by earth and atmospheric scientists would take place? Box 1 presents a set of definitions of the key elements of risk assessment, (such assessment involves complex multidisciplinary work). In terms of the specific methodologies for the determination of damage losses, there are many organisations that have carried out such disaster loss modelling work. Unfortunately, the access tends to be highly restricted as these methodologies and related software have a high commercial value in the insurance and real-estate markets.

When such risk has been determined, planners need to decide whether it is within acceptable limits. The United Nations Disaster Relief Co-ordinator (United Nations Disaster Relief Co-ordinator 1984) considers risk to be unacceptable when a community undergoes severe damage and incurs such losses to its members and physical appurtenances that the social structure is disrupted and the fulfilment of all or some of the essential functions of the society is prevented.

When the risk is not acceptable, urban planners are faced with the need to know how can risk be reduced? Choosing the right strategy; however, can be difficult since there are many available options. The three-dimensional matrix in Figure 1 allows an insight into the range of options: levels of government (who will implement the strategy?).

**Key Definitions**

**Natural hazard (H)** determination involves the estimation of the probability of occurrence (within a specific period of time in a given area) of a potentially damaging natural phenomenon.

**Vulnerability (V)** determination involves the estimation of the degree of loss to a given element at risk or a set of such elements resulting from the occurrence of a natural phenomenon of a given magnitude and expressed on a scale from 0 (no damage) to 1 (total damage).

**The elements at risk (E)** include the population, the buildings, the civil engineering works, economic activities, public services, utilities and infrastructure, etc. at risk at a given area.

**Specific risk (Rs)** determination involves the estimation of the expected degree of loss due to a particular natural phenomenon and as a function of both natural hazard and vulnerability (Rs = H x V).

**Risk (R)** determination involves the estimation of the expected damage or loss of property and human lives and disruption of economic activity due to a particular natural phenomenon (R = E x Rs).

Source: United Nations Disaster Relief Co-ordinator, 1991

![Figure 1: Range of Implementation Strategies (Montoya, 2002)](image-url)

**Geographic Information Systems in Disaster Management**

Bridging gaps in disaster management does not only involve advances in technical aspects but also in the more pragmatic aspects of knowledge transfer in a manner that enables the final user, (the decision-making community), to understand and use it... the right information, in the right format, in time to make the right decision” (Global Disaster Information Network, 2002).

Unfortunately, in developing countries, weak disaster management is partly rooted in the lack of integrative (i.e. risk scenario) information products. Tucker et al (1994) illustrate the problem clearly by indicating that the 1988 Spitak earthquake in Armenia (former USSR) and the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake in California were of similar size and affected comparably-sized populations. However, the Armenian event killed 25,000 people while the Californian earthquake killed 63. In this case the difference in the casualty figures does not result from the hazard but from vulnerability of the buildings.

In summary, for ensuring successful urban disaster management, four different types of information must be made available to decision-makers:

1. **Self “coping” capacity** refers to the degree to which the different income groups can either cover the economic losses themselves or through disaster insurance.
2. **Hazard assessment and risk assessment of likely scenarios** (i.e. property damage, human casualties) summed up as annual losses (or in any other interval required by decision-makers) for each type of natural phenomenon.
3. **Triggering effects of natural phenomena.**
4. **Mitigation options (types and costs).**

All four types of information requirements necessary for disaster mitigation planning have a geographic component. The greatest advantage of geographic information systems (GIS) for disaster management is their speed. Following the input of basic data, GIS systems facilitate the rapid generation of the various information products that are necessary for decision-makers during emergency situations. During the response and recovery phases, GIS is a very
Using GIS, the different groups involved in geo-information production can generate a wide range of valuable information for disaster management. The assessment of damage, the clearing of rubble and the generation of basic services (primarily water, electricity and transport) are just some examples of useful applications. GIS is a useful and efficient tool that integrates data from many different sources to carry out a complex chain of dataset integration in a speedy and methodical manner. Since natural disasters do not respect administrative or political boundaries, the establishment of disaster information networks could lead to a considerable improvement in disaster management. Setting up successful disaster data/information infrastructure networks is one of the greatest challenges faced by the geo-information community.

The Case of Cartago

The city of Cartago in Costa Rica was selected as case study due to its high susceptibility to hazards as it represents a typical example of a city with very limited geographic data and information products. The city is medium-sized (150,000 inhabitants) and is located downstream from rivers originating near the Irazú volcano’s crater and it has therefore been washed away by lahars (mudflows of volcanic origin) several times throughout its history. On the path of one of these rivers lies the San Blas landslide, considered the biggest landslide in Central America in terms of volume. Two active seismic faults, located a few hundred metres from built-up areas, have been responsible for earthquakes which devastated the city in 1841 and 1910. This city therefore requires not only an appropriate disaster management plan but one which should be of a multi-hazard nature, as a volcanic eruption can trigger a lahar or an earthquake can trigger a landslide. The city is very diverse in terms of the building materials and drastic changes in population densities that occur throughout the day due to its condition as “dormitory city” since many of its inhabitants work in San José and commute on a daily basis.

Information Products

To illustrate the possible scope of GIS application to disaster management, a few relevant earthquake-mitigation information products generated using GIS are presented.

The identification of essential facilities is particularly important since they must remain fully operational during a catastrophic event. Using a detailed land-use map as input, a simple reclassification of pixels can be applied to group essential facilities into those which are key for rescue and relief (“first order”), those which could provide temporary accommodation (“second order”) and all other remaining uses into another class.

A simple buffer operation was then applied to the pixels classified as “essential facilities - second order” to assess the proximity to potential temporary accommodation (Figure 2). This allows emergency planners to identify “unserviced areas” where tent camps might need to be set up.

In Cartago, a ban on the construction of mud-brick buildings was issued in 1840 and another one was issued on un-reinforced masonry buildings in 1910. Since these bans have been observed and enforced, it can therefore be concluded that these building types can only be found within the “1945 or earlier” class. A historical map of urban development with an associated table (Figure 3a and 3b) was therefore created to illustrate the possible scope of GIS application to disaster management.
used to identify the areas with highly vulnerable buildings. Such an identification is important for disaster managers as it allows them to concentrate their efforts in a particular area rather than conducting city-wide studies.

Table calculations and overlaying procedures such as the ‘crossing’ of maps enabled the generation of a final building damage map which has been aggregated to the census tract level in order to conduct further data integration (Figure 4). This map highlights the areas where more economic damage is expected and permits the prioritisation of further damage reduction studies. Aggregation is not only important from the point of view of linking up with lower resolution datasets but it is also an important tool to avoid the representation of individual area objects. By this technique it is possible to keep the uncertainties related to data accuracy and precision under control. The risk scenarios were annualized to identify the most damaging one. Finally, a cost-benefit analysis was carried out for two implementation measures (Table 2). This constitutes a mitigation analysis of a reduction nature. In terms of a mitigation analysis of a prevention nature, the environmentally constraint areas were identified. Individual data layers were created for each of the hazards (fault rupture, river flood and laval) as well as for nature protected areas. The fault rupture and river flood maps were produced using buffering techniques as regulations and recommendations indicate that no development should occur at given distance from these features. All four maps were overlaid to produce one single map.

### Table 2: Cost-benefit analysis of reduction measures

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### Final Remarks

The role of GIS in disaster management should focus on the integration of information from many diverse sources to produce interactive products for decision-makers rather being used as a tool for mapping and visualizing raw data. The illustrations in the previous section have demonstrated the need for data integration. In cases where there is no attempt to integrate datasets, the implications of the information are not immediately visible, causing confusion and in the worst cases, the formulation of inadequate strategies. It may also be argued that the lack of integrative products hampers the transparency and accountability of the decision-making process.

### Note

This is based on Ph.D. research carried out at the International Institute for Geo-Information Science and Earth Observation (ITC) and the University of Utrecht (UU).

### References


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