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Ecuadorian Children's Perception of the Japan Disasters

Context

The Republic of Ecuador is situated on the imaginary line that divides the planet in two hemispheres. Located in the northwest of South America, it is bordered by Colombia in the north, Peru in the east and south, and by the Pacific Ocean in the west. There is a population of around 14,000,000 people, 54% of them live in urban areas, while the rest lives in rural areas.

There are more than 40 newspapers published every day in Ecuador. Around ten of them have national circulation.

There are around 12 private TV channels with national broadcasting and one public channel. There is also a large cover of satellite or cable TV channels.

Ecuador is sitting on the Pacific Ring of Fire and in the country there are 70 volcanoes, 14 of them are active. Although in the last decade there has not been any major earthquake reported, the country has certain "vulnerabilities" for its location in an area of high seismic risk.

Coastal areas are frequently threatened by flooding caused by phenomena like "El Niño" and "La Niña".

The Sample

We interviewed 31 Ecuadorian children, divided in two subgroups, one of 17 children residing at the Metropolitan District of Quito (big city),

Pichincha province, and another of 14 children, residing at Santa Elena Canton (countryside) located in the Santa Elena province. The interviews were held on March 19 to 1, 2011.¹

The ages of the interviewed are between 9 and 13 years of age. In the total sample there was a gender balance. There is also a balance between the amount of students of primary and secondary education.

We found a greatest polarization regarding parent's educational level: in Quito, both mothers and fathers have reached university levels, while in Santa Elena the great majority only has primary education level. That has a relation, not only with the residence matter (big city and countryside), but also with the social status of the families the interviewees belong to.

Relevant results

Like other children around the world, all of the interviewed Ecuadorian children knew something had happened in Japan. The most mentioned events were the tsunami and the earthquake. It is interesting that in Santa Elena there are more comments about the tsunami than about the earthquake. We have to take into account that the coastal population of Ecuador was evacuated as a measure to prevent the damages of the tsunami in the Pacific area.

Television is seen like the main source through which most of the girls and boys knew about what happened in Japan. In Quito, most of the interviewees talked with the family about what happened but in Santa Elena that barely happened. This lack of inter-family relation can be caused by authoritarian cultural patterns, centered in behavior regulation and by the poor family intervention that the family is currently developing in certain issues.

The main concerns expressed by the children can be summarized in the following aspects:

Solidarity mobilization:

Daniel, 9: "We are talking about delivering donations".

Consequences for the own country:

Sebastián, 11: "A catastrophe like that one in Ecuador, it disappears".

Consequences for the own family:

Ginger, 11: "I did talk about it and I told them we are going to evacuate because there had been an earthquake..."

Harmful effects of the events:

Sarahí, 10: "The nuclear plant can burn the skin and there have been many missing people."

In Ecuador there are not exclusive channels for children's shows so children noted a specific national

channel or CNN. For them, the news shows explained:

The consequences of the disaster:

Adriana, 12: "...he explained to me about the fact of why there had been an earthquake, where and how many deaths and missing persons there are."

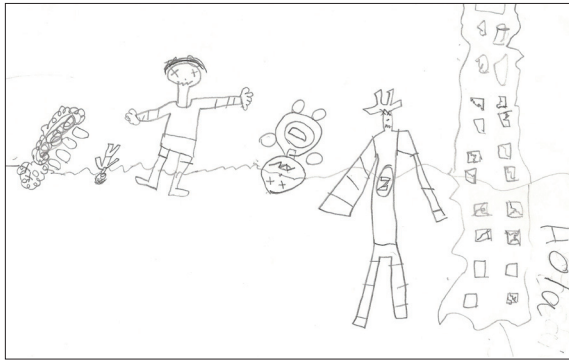


Figure 1: Drawing by Martín, 11

The consequences for Ecuador:

Andrea, 9: "...that people from Japan could come here and that the waves could get to Esmeraldas, La Libertad."²

The causes of the tsunami:

Sebastián, 11: "...the tsunami happened because the tectonic plates clashed under the sea."

In the drawing made by the children on what happened in Japan, there is generally a coincidence concerning the tsunami relevance, the damage it caused to human beings and their houses, but it is interesting how in Ecuador the concern for animals and plants emerged, something not seen as a topic in the drawings of the girls and boys from other countries:

Diana, 11: "What I drew was that there was a tsunami and it took all the cars and even the trees and pigeons fled all over the place."

Katerin, 9: "In Japan came a giant wave and killed trees and animals."

Vanessa, 12: "What happened in Japan was that it destroyed all houses and trees in Japan."

We must keep in mind that agriculture is one of the most important items in Ecuadorian economy and that Ecuador has an important wooded area at Amazonia.

Some girls included in their drawings

feminine and masculine human figures in interaction. In the case of boys, whenever they drew persons, they represented them as doodles or just as masculine human figures. It is also interesting that one boy included in the drawing several characters from Japanese cartoons, with sizes larger than the ones of people, which shows the importance it has for him and that they are his closest Japanese reference (see figure 1).

Martín, 11: "Nobita, the dog of cosmic Hattori, Masinger Z and some Japanese people."

When children were asked to draw in a sheet representing a TV screen, how the perfect show would explain to boys and girls what happened in Japan, they preferred news show as the spaces par excellence to get to know what occurred in the Asian country. So, generally, there is a predominance of the classic news structure for adults in Ecuador with two presenters of different sex sitting behind a table with a big screen in the background running images from Japan (Andrea, 9).

The concern for knowing what happens behind the cameras can be seen in a drawing where there is a person with a professional camera filming another at the place of the events (Daniel, 9). In general, drawings referring to what happened in Japan directly, as if they were images taken live prevail. Some cartoon and TV series characters were drawn as presenters. Doraemon, the cartoon character,



Figure 1: Drawing by Deysy, 11

appears in two occasions (Nicolás, 12), the same as the Power Rangers, superheroes designed to face powerful evildoers (William, 10). There was one child who drew a Teletubbie (Martín, 10) and another drew Sponge Bob (Deysy, 11: "I drew Sponge Bob because I find it appealing") (see figure 2). These are the drawings that show the greatest closeness to children's codes for communication from TV and at the same time reveal the importance of cartoons and TV series characters for kids.

A message placed in one of the drawings caught our eye on children's simple and metaphoric language with which they identify themselves:

Martina, 11: "Look, kids, a tsunami is going to eat a flower field".

In all the interviewed existed preoccupation on the situation in Japan, as well as a high perception of risk because the majority considers that the catastrophe is or could also be harmful for them.

Generally, children considered that they need more information through television programs. Their main questions are: data about the human and material losses, and major knowledge about nuclear power plants. ■

NOTES

- ¹ In Ecuador, a team from CEFOCINE, an NGO dedicated to the training of kids in audiovisual communication, contributed to this work: psychologist Lilia Jaramillo, the teacher Angela Edita Romero and Rafael Carriel, Head of CEFOCINE.
- ² Esmeraldas is one of the 24 provinces of Ecuador; La Libertad is a small town at Esmeraldas.

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