

Humanitarian Aid as Global Governance: The Architecture of the Red Cross's Relief Operations after the 1976 Guatemala Earthquake

Journal Article**Author(s):**

Nuijsink, Cathelijne; Bonzanigo, Annamaria

Publication date:

2023

Permanent link:

<https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000627711>

Rights / license:


[Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International](#)

Originally published in:

Architectural Theory Review 27(1), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13264826.2023.2228940>



Humanitarian Aid as Global Governance: The Architecture of the Red Cross's Relief Operations after the 1976 Guatemala Earthquake

Cathelijne Nuijsink  and Annamaria Bonzanigo 

ETH Zurich

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the disaster relief operation that was set in motion immediately after the 1976 Guatemala earthquake through the activities of the Guatemalan Red Cross Society. Already in the emergency phase, “Guatecrúz” built field offices in the disaster region to manage both the relief efforts as well as to set up forty-three tent cities. By taking a seat in the disaster zone, as opposed to coordinating from a distant headquarters, Guatecrúz became the main governing body in a large network of different national and international state and non-state actors. This paper sets out to elucidate the non-governmental logic behind the making, financing, building, and operation of Guatecrúz’s field offices and introduce it as an early example of contracting out services that were previously controlled by the government to non-governmental organisations. Untangling a large-scale humanitarian crisis from these field offices, this paper introduces a specific institutional history that uses decentralisation as a method to plan, develop, and build an “architecture of global governance.”

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 30 September 2022
Accepted 19 June 2023

KEYWORDS

Humanitarian aid; disaster response; 1976 Guatemala earthquake; Guatemalan Red Cross; field offices

Introduction

In the early hours of the morning of February 4, 1976, Guatemala experienced the biggest natural tragedy in its entire history. A 7.5-magnitude earthquake struck around 50 kilometres southwest of Guatemala City, killing 23,000, injuring 76,000, and leaving more than a million people homeless.¹ The earthquake hit a country that had already been torn apart by a civil war between the Guatemalan government and leftist rebel groups, which had been ongoing since 1960.² The “double disaster” of a natural catastrophe hitting a site of armed conflict exposed serious disruptions to the functioning of a community. The complexity of the emergency could not be solved by a sovereign state acting alone but required cooperation among many actors.³ As such, the government of Guatemala reached out to nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and

CONTACT Cathelijne Nuijsink  cathelijne.nuijsink@gta.arch.ethz.ch

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) from both inside and outside the country to aid in the re-sheltering of the affected population. Among the humanitarian relief actions that followed, the partnership between the Guatemalan government and the humanitarian organisation of the League of Red Cross Societies stood out. The League of Red Cross Societies (hereafter “the League”) initiated an international relief operation in Guatemala of an exceptional scale in which the Guatemalan Red Cross Society (hereafter “Guatecruz”) was given prime agency.⁴

This paper analyses the disaster relief operation in the wake of the 1976 Guatemala earthquake through the activities of Guatecruz to offer new insights into an alternative relief mechanism that extended far into the affected area thanks to a multitude of field offices.⁵ *In situ* decentralised operations were not an entirely novel approach in humanitarianism but were earlier introduced in relief operations in conflict zones. At the start of World War One, in 1914, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) started to conduct field work, collecting *in situ* information on war prisoners to be repatriated. The novelty of the Guatecruz field offices, though, was in their decentralised operation logic. The great number of field offices allowed the Red Cross to coordinate a much larger project of sheltering and reconstruction than it could from working from its headquarters alone. Already in the emergency phase, Guatecruz built temporary offices in the disaster region to manage Red Cross relief efforts, as well as coordinating forty-three tent cities. By taking a seat in the disaster zone, as opposed to coordinating relief efforts from a distant office, Guatecruz became the leading body in what consisted of a large network of different national and international players. To operate as quickly as possible across the entire disaster site, the organisation had to share (during the emergency phase) or delegate (during the reconstruction phase) its power over these field offices. The meeting of these different actors and different interests acting on the disaster-stricken area produced an “architecture of global governance”: an architecture that is the result of a much larger network of national and international interest, and in which the architect plays only a supporting role. In the emergency phase, this architecture of global governance took the form of tent cities, and the conversion of existing infrastructure (the stadium, the airport) into distribution centres channelling international goods and expertise. In the reconstruction phase, the architecture of global governance expressed itself in shelters and more permanent wooden houses (*casitas*) relying on foreign materials and expertise.

In this paper, we introduce the architectural products resulting from the relief operation following the 1976 Guatemala earthquake in light of global governance practices. This architecture was not the outcome of a single institution, but the physical expression of a complex decentralised operation logic governed by multiple state and non-state actors. Using extensive archival materials from the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), the Swiss Red Cross national society, and newspaper articles, as well as secondary literature from the fields of humanitarianism and disaster relief, this paper sets out to trace the roles, responsibilities, and agency of the various actors involved in the relief operation following the earthquake and elucidate the non-governmental logic behind the making, financing, building, and operating of Guatecruz’s decentralised operations. The paper begins by discussing the entanglement between modern humanitarianism and the Red Cross

and Red Crescent Movement. Next, it reconstructs the humanitarian relief operation after the 1976 Guatemala earthquake from the activities of the Guatemalan Red Cross. Within this reconstruction, we highlight first the coordinating character of the League and second, the managing role of Guatecruz in the relief operation.

Through an analysis of Guatecruz's pivotal involvement in the disaster relief operation, spanning from the initial response phase to the subsequent reconstruction efforts during the recovery phase, this study sheds light on the evolution of Red Cross humanitarianism as a significant facet of global governance. The implications of this evolution are observed to have a direct impact on urban and architectural developments, as evidenced by the 1976 Guatemala relief operation.

International Humanitarianism and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

Humanitarianism can be dated to at least the eighteenth century when, fuelled by Christian ideals and new humanist ideologies, liberal and religiously motivated humanitarians began to foster new forms of compassion to lessen human suffering.⁶ Yet it was only with the founding of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 1863, which contributed to the conclusion of the first Geneva Convention in 1864, that humanitarianism was codified and regulated. The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement was founded by the ICRC, making it a crucial actor in the development of modern humanitarianism. The objective of the ICRC was and remains to provide assistance and protection to war victims.⁷ In 1919, a year after the end of World War One, the movement expanded and was complemented by the League of the Red Cross Societies (LRCS), a Red Cross organisation founded to coordinate and assist its national member societies with their humanitarian efforts also during peacetime, more specifically in areas hit hard by natural disasters like floods, droughts, and earthquakes.⁸ The rise of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement went hand in hand with the expansion of humanitarian action in general. Before World War One, most humanitarian activities occurred outside of formal channels of governance. During the war, nation states became involved in humanitarian action and started to create humanitarian organisations. The foundation of the League of Nations in 1920, the first worldwide IGO, established the groundwork for this new development in the history of humanitarianism.⁹

The extensive damage caused by World War Two led to an increased institutionalisation of humanitarian action. The year 1943 saw the establishment of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), followed by the signing of the United Nations Charter in 1945. The 1949 Geneva Conventions further extended relief practices with the founding of such representative bodies of the United Nations (UN) as the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in 1949 and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 1950.¹⁰ In contrast to such IGOs as the UN, the Red Cross organisations (ICRC and LRCS) operate as private voluntary organisations whose members collaborate for a common purpose.¹¹ And unlike IGOs, the Red Cross organisations ICRC and LRCS are *charitable* organisations supported

by private donations rather than state sponsorship. However, to play a role in global governance, charitable organisations must have access to those places where decisions are made.¹² The special status of the national Red Cross societies is crucial in this regard. National Red Cross societies are neither governmental institutions nor completely separate NGOs, but rather independent, voluntary aid groups that collaborate with official government agencies.¹³ National Red Cross societies have been able to maintain their independence while collaborating with the government in humanitarian crises thanks to their legal status as “auxiliaries” to the state, being often recognised as the “official” humanitarian organisation, receiving special agency in the relief operation, and reaching places other organisations could not.¹⁴

In the “age of neo-humanitarianism,” as historian Michael Barnett coined the period 1945–91, the focus of humanitarian aid shifted from assisting Europeans to a concern for the people in the “Third World.”¹⁵ NGOs located within the United Nations system that were originally created for the relief and reconstruction of Europe now started to operate on a global scale.¹⁶ This global provision of aid was accompanied by an advancement in science and technology, which in the 1970s, thanks to the development of meteorological forecasting technology, led many international organisations to consider natural disasters as a development issue.¹⁷ The foundation of the United Nations Disaster Relief Organization (UNDRO) in 1971, as argued by historian Lukas Schemper, made clear that natural disasters could no longer be considered an exclusively humanitarian and social issue, but were also a development one.¹⁸ Indeed, UNDRO’s responsibility was to make sure that, in the event of a disaster, the relief efforts of all potential donors—governments and public or private institutions—were mobilised and coordinated in order to meet the needs of the affected country in the quickest and most effective way.¹⁹ Unlike the League, which actively sends delegates on site to assist national Red Cross societies in actual disaster relief work, UNDRO assumed a purely coordinating role “in the office,” focusing on disaster mitigation and prevention and uniting the different organisations operating on the disaster site. The League’s newly emphasised role as manager of the field operations undertaken by its national societies in the aftermath of the 1976 Guatemala earthquake, as well as its duty to empower Guatecruz in its auxiliary role to the Guatemala state, demonstrate how, as early as the 1970s, Red Cross humanitarianism was increasingly becoming a matter of global governance, with a direct impact on urban and architectural developments.²⁰

The League of Red Cross Societies Receiving Alarm Calls

On February 5, 1976, a Guatemala-stationed Delegate of the League of Red Cross Societies reached out to the League’s headquarters in Geneva to report that a strong earthquake had struck at 3 am the day before with a magnitude of 7.5 on the Richter scale; due to communication issues, they warned, the extent of the damage was still unknown.²¹ The earthquake turned out to be a disastrous “class-quake.”²² While wealthy areas in the capital, Guatemala City, suffered only minor damage, it had destroyed the *adobe* houses of the Indian population living in the Highlands, as well as the slums on the outskirts of Guatemala City and four neighbouring cities (fig. 1).²³ The Guatemala government

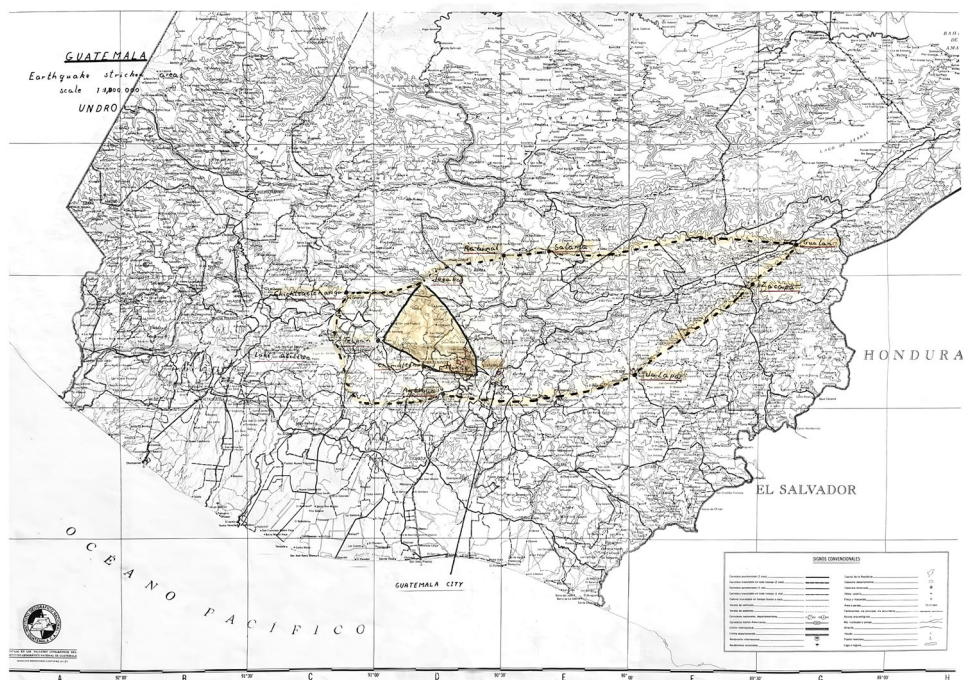


Figure 1. Map of the areas stricken by the 1976 Guatemala earthquake. Map: International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies Archives, Geneva (hereafter referred to as IFRC Archives) © Instituto Nacional Geográfico de Guatemala (IGN). This map may circulate, according to resolution no. 227–2023 of the National Geographic Institute “Ingeniero Alfredo Obiols Gomez,” exclusively in the issue of *ATR* in which this article is published. This map was elaborated with information from the Cartographic Base of the National Geographic Institute “Ingeniero Alfredo Obiols Gomez,” Guatemala, June 2, 2023. All rights reserved; reproduction is prohibited.

immediately declared a state of national emergency, and appealed to the UN and Guatecruz for assistance.²⁴ The government was equally quick to set up a *Comité Nacional de Emergencias* (CONE, a National Emergency Committee), a military-led state-affiliated organisation consisting of the Minister of Health, the President of Social Security, the president of Guatecruz, and health technicians, to coordinate the rescue efforts on a national level.²⁵ This National Emergency Committee assigned Guatecruz to coordinate the relief activities in the destroyed villages of Chimaltenango, Jalapa, Sanarate, San Juan, San Pedro, and San Raymundo Sacatepequez. The League responded to its responsibilities by establishing a League Delegation comprising of five disaster professionals to assist Guatecruz in this daunting task (fig. 2).

These so-called “delegates” of the League were crucial figures in the coordination of Red Cross relief operations as, by the society’s own regulations, a Delegate is the person informing the League about the affected national society’s statistics, needs, and priorities.²⁶ Such position required special training: to become a Red Cross Delegate, one had to complete a course that included both a theoretical component on the various aspects and organisation of a relief operation, tropical diseases, the importance of information, social work, and the role of young people, as well as a practical component of field experience.²⁷ In the case of the 1976 Guatemala earthquake, it was, indeed,

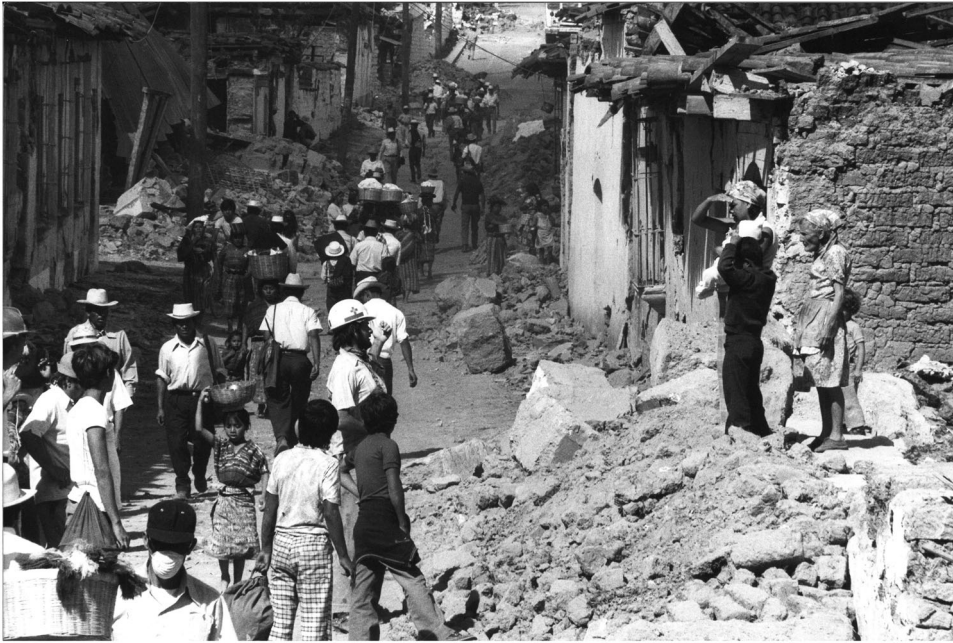


Figure 2. A Red Cross Delegate confers with inhabitants in San Martin to establish their needs. Photo: Swiss Red Cross Archives, Wabern (hereafter referred to as Swiss Red Cross Archives). The Swiss Red Cross (SRC) has made six images available for use in this academic article, depicting the intervention in Guatemala following the 1976 earthquake. The SRC understands these images to be free of rights and free of charge. The SRC is not aware of any third-party claims arising from copyright or licenses. It cannot, therefore, be held liable for any claims by third parties. Reuse is not permitted.

a Delegate who first informed the Geneva headquarters about the disaster. In his call for help, the Delegate emphasised the importance of shelter, stating that Guatemala City alone already required 16,000 tents. A week later, closely observing the evolution of the first emergency aid contribution, the Delegate informed the League that the most urgent priority had changed from shelter to generators, as they needed energy to operate medical services, medical aid, help centres, camps, and rescue brigades.²⁸

With the first alarm bells ringing, the League—from its headquarters in Geneva—launched an international appeal on February 5 to its national societies. In a Newsflash report distributed to all its 122 member societies, the League called for help and, with that, set in motion a major international relief operation for the victims of the Guatemala earthquake. Though participation by national Red Cross societies is voluntary, the response was overwhelming. By the end of the entire relief operation, no fewer than 71 national societies had made contributions, in kind or in cash, worth a total of 56 million Swiss francs, demonstrating their solidarity with the victims of the disaster. Generally speaking, national societies can aid in three different ways: donating money, goods, or expertise.²⁹ The American Red Cross opted for the provision of large quantities of army supplies, such as trucks, jeeps, and ambulances, that could be directed to facilitate the emergency relief operation's transportation logics.³⁰ Canada and Japan

strongly cared about the catastrophe in Guatemala, but chose to keep their distance, sending large monetary donations to allow Guatecruz to buy supplies. The Federal Republic of Germany and the Swiss Confederation preferred longer-term development aid by sending experts. Every single form of donation was not totally apolitical, but rather brought with it its own distinct (geo)political undercurrent.

Guatecruz as the Leading Body of the Emergency Aid Operation

During the emergency phase of the relief operation, Guatecruz's position was clearly defined. Guatemala's national Red Cross society was in charge of *managing* the relief effort, which included the establishment of medical services, first aid stations, and camps, as well as the provision of food, clothes, and medication, with the assistance of the League Delegation.³¹ Although relief efforts on this scale often run into problems on the political or logistical front, the Guatemalan Red Cross promoted the relief operation as a model for how a disaster response may be handled logistically.³² Only five days after the earthquake, the president of Guatecruz was proud to report to the League that "we are getting duly organized."³³ He was referring to the first tent camps, which had been established using tents brought from Germany only one day earlier. One week after the earthquake, a thousand Red Cross volunteers and staff were working in the disaster area. Guatecruz played a key role in this regard. In consultation with the National Emergency Committee and with the assistance of League Delegates, the organisation evaluated the priorities with the rescue teams, both Guatemalan and foreign, that were already providing aid.³⁴

Establishing multiple field offices in the disaster area was a crucial component of Guatecruz's strategy for managing the relief operation (fig. 3). A first step was to convert its main office into an action headquarters for the injured. Chairs and tables were replaced with foldable emergency stretchers, and first aiders wearing white helmets labelled "médico" brought injured people they had pulled from the ruins. From the former bureaucratic environment of its headquarters, only the white ceiling paneling remained.³⁵ Guatecruz then set up headquarters in Chimaltenango, a city of 25,000 people which was one of the areas worst affected by the earthquake. Besides a Red Cross tent camp with 256 white poly-cotton tents labelled as "gifts," the city of Chimaltenango was also aided with a national gift from the United States in the form of a 100-bed "US Government Hospital."³⁶ By February 12, just eight days after the initial shock waves were felt, the organisation had established no fewer than five offices "in the field," which besides the tent city of Chimaltenango included the San Martin, Jalapa, San Juan Sacatepequez, and El Progreso camps (fig. 4).

Neighbouring countries were keen to demonstrate support by rapidly arriving on the scene. Upon hearing the news, the Red Cross societies of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Panama immediately sent supplies and personnel to Guatemala, which Guatecruz delegated to their respective tent cities.³⁷ After receiving a report listing the needs of the affected populations and creating an inventory, Guatecruz decided not only to concentrate its efforts in relief activity, but to also initiate a major disaster relief operation. While attributing certain regions of the affected territory to its sister societies, Guatecruz could maintain its role as conveyor of the

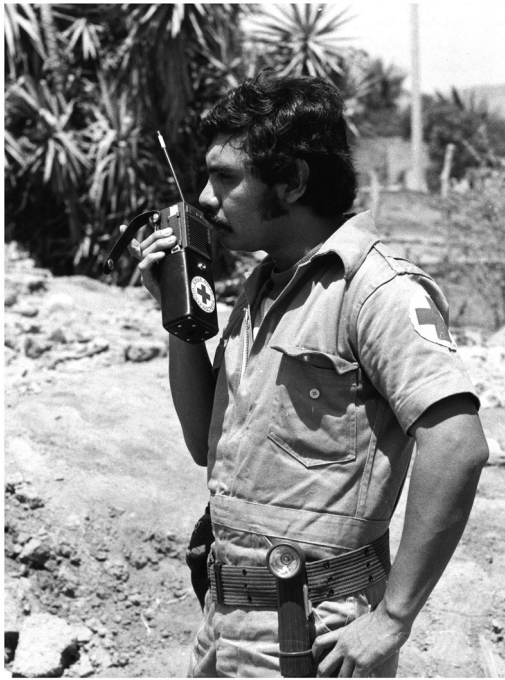


Figure 3. The topographical conditions of the disaster site—a mountainous region with blocked roads—required the establishment of a communication network that could support the network of physical field offices. In response to the breakdown of the regular communication systems, Red Cross personnel equipped themselves with walkie-talkies to coordinate tasks more effectively. Source: Swiss Red Cross Archives. The Swiss Red Cross (SRC) has made six images available for use in this academic article, depicting the intervention in Guatemala following the 1976 earthquake. The SRC understands these images to be free of rights and free of charge. The SRC is not aware of any third-party claims arising from copyright or licenses. It cannot, therefore, be held liable for any claims by third parties. Reuse is not permitted.

needs of the affected populations through its “double” commitment to the government: first through its mandate as auxiliary to the public authorities, and then with its president serving as one of the board members of the National Committee of Disaster Relief, which granted Guatecruz access throughout the disaster site.

In addition to operating the five tent cities “from within,” Guatecruz deliberately positioned itself inside the airport and assumed responsibility for the relief supplies from their new field office. Staffed by a League Delegate and Guatecruz personnel who were on duty twenty-four hours a day, the airport served as a reception centre to channel the influx of food, clothing, and medicine supplies addressed to the Red Cross, which arrived in response to the international appeal launched by the League. Guatecruz’s effectiveness in channelling the donated goods within the airport to their destination is well documented in the IFRC archives. “A shipment of medicaments from the German Red Cross was received at the hospital two hours after landing and tents were in place 48 hours later,” according to a League Delegate, who also praised the lack of customs regulations or other formalities, which allowed for the smooth distribution of the foreign gifts. “All relief goods [were] unloaded directly from plane



Figure 4. Earthquake victims housed in “Campo Marte,” a Red Cross tent city in the capital city of Guatemala. Photo: Swiss Red Cross Archives, ©Jean-Pierre Laffont. Reuse not permitted.

to trucks and sent off to the disaster area.”³⁸ The influx of goods from abroad was not, however, accepted unconditionally by the local population. The emergency food sent by the United States, for example, was considered “entirely unnecessary,” and even harmful to the market of local farmers who grew their own corn.³⁹ Many Indians feared donations of any kind, whether food or building materials, reasoning that they would turn the villagers towards new leaders who would give away things for free and weaken their sense of community built over the years.⁴⁰

Less than two weeks after the actual earthquake struck, Guatecruz moved its operational headquarters entirely to the Olympic Stadium in Guatemala City to avoid congestion at the newly established action headquarters and to extend a smoother operation of the relief effort to a wider area.⁴¹ The 7,500-square-metre venue, initially constructed for the 1950 Central American and Caribbean Games, served as a central hub for all international shipments. Here, volunteers from various humanitarian organisations collected, reorganised, and redistributed packages of varying size and content labelled with inscriptions such as “España,” “México,” “Nescafé,” and “Jumex” (fig. 5). Yet another field office was set up in a large house in Antigua that Guatecruz rented for use as a temporary hospital, owing to the great number of sick and injured people needing medical care in this area. On the recommendation of the League, Guatecruz increased its assistance to areas it had initially covered and small settlements between the villages by supplying more tents, food, blankets, and medicine. In addition, Guatecruz enlarged its delegation to include seven numbered zones, as well as Colonia Naya, Colonia Kennedy, and Colonia Atlantis—areas which were not previously designated to the Red Cross.



Figure 5. Red Cross volunteers sort relief supplies prior to distribution in Guatemala City's Olympic Stadium, temporarily a Red Cross warehouse. Photo: Swiss Red Cross Archives, ©Jean-Pierre Laffont. Reuse not permitted.

By February 17, Guatecruz had assumed control of forty-three tent camps with the help of its sister societies. Accompanied by other parties, such as CONE, which moved from the Presidential Palace to the airport together with the US relief coordinators, the field offices of airport stadium and temporary hospital became complex grounds where the interests of different NGOs, IGOs, and governments collided.⁴² Throughout the emergency phase, cooperation and coordination between the Red Cross Societies, the United Nations, the National Emergency Committee, and other voluntary organisations continued on all levels. To streamline the humanitarian activities of the voluntary agencies other than the national Red Cross societies active in the disaster site, UNDRO hosted a first meeting on February 25, 1976. Agencies that wanted to operate in a specific region had to examine the area where they would provide aid and determine what services they could offer before consulting CONE for authorisation.⁴³ A committee made of voluntary NGOs working on site that did not have the legal status of “auxiliary” to the authorities, nominated a League member as its communication coordinator, giving the Red Cross considerable agency.⁴⁴ In meetings between these voluntary agencies, the Red Cross tent city of Chimaltenango served as the model par excellence. This new Red Cross “field office,” much like other newly built Red Cross headquarters, operated as a strategic warehouse from which supplies were restocked and distributed to the isolated mountainous districts.⁴⁵

From Immediate Relief to Reconstruction

Only three weeks after the catastrophic earthquake, discussions between the government of Guatemala and multiple aid organisations, both IGOs, and NGOs, moved towards rehabilitation and reconstruction. After an emergency response phase that was declared “successful,” it was not surprising that the League and Guatecruz would also come to play a role in longer-term recovery in the form of rebuilding the community’s infrastructure. In the case of this earthquake there was, however, a special urgency driving the swift transition from immediate relief to reconstruction. Although tent cities were constructed and put into operation at a fast pace, this kind of temporary housing would not be adequate to host thousands of newly homeless people over the following months. As the rainy season approached, earthquake victims were likely to become flood victims, and were therefore forced to abandon the tents in search of safer shelter. Guatecruz and the League Delegation in Guatemala were authorised to develop a Red Cross “plan of action” for the next phase of the operation, which would include reconstruction and resettlement of the homeless, in collaboration with Guatemalan authorities and international, governmental, and non-governmental organisations working in the country. Just weeks before the 1976 United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat I) in Vancouver for the first time defined adequate shelter as “a basic human right,” the official Guatecruz Rehabilitation Plan was approved. The plan prioritised the delivery of materials to build 10,000 houses for the elderly and most vulnerable. Second, it included the construction of approximately twenty new permanent Red Cross centres in the most severely damaged areas, which would initially serve as administrative centres for the distribution of relief supplies and management of the “work-living” program established within the framework of the construction, as well as first aid stations. After the reconstruction, these facilities would turn into community gathering places. Third, the plan included the reconstruction and repair of all Guatemalan Red Cross buildings that had been badly damaged or destroyed, as well as the replacement of equipment to allow the Red Cross Society to carry out its responsibilities.⁴⁶

The village of El Progreso formed the testing ground for the Guatecruz reconstruction initiative. The village, which had been more than 80 per cent destroyed by the earthquake, leaving ten thousand people homeless, was the subject of an ambitious program to complete two thousand temporary homes before the rainy season in May.⁴⁷ The Red Cross and Guatemalan officials agreed that the dwellings would be built on property that had previously belonged to, or been inhabited by, families.⁴⁸ In exchange, the Red Cross provided the materials required to build the temporary homes. The materials for the *casitas*’ wooden walls and corrugated iron roofs were, when available, purchased locally in Guatemala or, if the local market was saturated, in neighbouring countries. The various elements were cut with on-site sawmills, assembled near the storage area, and then transported to the construction site by future residents. The journalist Juan Pekmez, who was dispatched to Guatemala by the Secretary of the League to report for one month on the work of the Red Cross during the reconstruction phase, reported that the greatest obstacle was the transportation of materials from Guatemala City to the villages in the Highlands, as the roads

were obstructed by landslides. A draisine that could merely carry lightweight materials was used to travel the rail tracks linking El Progreso to the capital of Guatemala without too much risk. Through telex, phone calls, teamwork, and the organisation of a regular shuttle service between El Progreso and Guatemala City, the League's Delegation stationed in Guatemala City "fulfilled wonderfully its role of strategic back and logistical support."⁴⁹ The El Progreso project was founded on the idea of providing food in exchange for assistance with construction. All those to whom housing would be provided were expected to participate in the rebuilding, not only their own housing but also that of others. Spurred on by the reward of food and a new home, local people redoubled their efforts to revive the destroyed town, completing around twenty homes each day.⁵⁰

The construction of *casitas* was set up as a form of participatory practice that tried to bring together the population of the Highlands to work with one another (fig. 6). Participatory design processes were not a novel phenomenon in architecture culture the 1970s. In fact, after the certainties and dogma offered by modernism, many architects, who were increasingly criticised for the mistakes of their technocratic past, began searching for a different direction. Involvement of future users in the design



Figure 6. In the foreground, a destroyed house; in the background, a *casita* in El Progreso, built with materials provided by the Red Cross. The roof is being covered with corrugated metal sheets. Source: Swiss Red Cross Archives. The Swiss Red Cross (SRC) has made six images available for use in this academic article, depicting the intervention in Guatemala following the 1976 earthquake. The SRC understands these images to be free of rights and free of charge. The SRC is not aware of any third-party claims arising from copyright or licenses. It cannot, therefore, be held liable for any claims by third parties. Reuse is not permitted.

process, self-build practices, and the design of layouts that could adapt to users' requirements were among the new approaches developed.⁵¹ El Progreso had this participatory character, with the future residents helping the construction of their own homes. Under the pressure of the upcoming rainy season, the reconstruction required an efficient collaboration. The same reporter who observed the transportation of building materials into El Progreso also noted "an incessant chain of workers" moving hammers, nails, and plywood panels between the warehouse and the assembly site.⁵² However, the participatory character of El Progreso's reconstruction had an unexpected consequence. By outsourcing reconstruction to a non-state entity that emphasised impartiality and neutrality in their construction process, the Guatemalan government unwittingly aided the growth of social movements. By engaging in collaborative construction of their dwellings, the historically marginalised residents of the Highlands were able to cultivate a collective identity.⁵³ This new sense of community would slowly give rise to a series of strikes and demonstrations in Guatemala City, and, eventually, bring to national attention the army's genocidal actions in the Highlands during the Guatemalan Civil War.⁵⁴

Guatecruz Taking a Permanent Seat "in the Field"

To be well prepared for future calamities occurring in Guatemala, the League declared on April 7, 1976 that it would be delegating as many of its duties as possible to Guatecruz.⁵⁵ In fact, during the entire relief operation, it had been the League's mission to support the internal development of Guatecruz. To assist the intervention skills of the national society, the League established two complementary programs to introduce technical expertise and educate others. One was a training program for young volunteers from the communities where Red Cross national societies had been assisting in the reconstruction. The goal of this training was to familiarise volunteers with the operation taking place in El Progreso, such as the ability to work with the on-site wood mills, the assembling of the partition walls, and the delivery of the metal roofs to the site for the building of *casitas*, in the hope that they would come to play an important role in the redevelopment of their own cities. The other program involved the training, by a League Delegate, of forty national first-aid workers. The course taught theoretical and practical knowledge about first aid intervention and introduced participants to data on natural disasters and the organisation of the Red Cross Society.⁵⁶ As such, the two programs together functioned as a knowledge base with which to intervene in future disasters, in Guatemala and beyond.

To improve its role in providing technical expertise, Guatecruz began constructing permanent institutions in the disaster-stricken area. Until that point, relief institutions were concentrated primarily in Guatemala City, while the Highland villages were mostly ignored by such infrastructure. With the closing of the Red Cross's two largest tent cities, Chimaltenango and Chiquimila, on May 4, 1976, the response phase was officially over, and the extension and dispersion of the rebuilding program, combined with the approaching rainy season, necessitated quick decisions with a long-term perspective. This shift to longer-term planning required more workshops, a reorganisation of

responsibilities, a new form of supply distribution, and the complex task of assigning very particular roles to individuals. El Progreso had shown that the setting up of tents in the emergency phase was relatively easy but the building of more permanent houses required more time, care, and expertise. If there were no skilled workers on site, they had to be recruited elsewhere and sent to teach future residents how to use the equipment. The coordination of all of this personnel required much greater precision.⁵⁷ In response to these new demands, the field offices started to operate as construction workshops to which Guatecruz delegated its members—those of its umbrella institution of the League of Red Cross Societies as well as different national Red Cross sister societies. To manage these tasks, Guatecruz strengthened its coordinating role between the different actors and institutions.⁵⁸ It directed the delivery of materials to the assembly workshops and from the assembly workshops to the relevant construction sites (fig. 7). Since hundreds of houses had to be erected at some distance from the assembly facility, Guatecruz offered logistical services including numbering the manufactured dwellings and assigning them to the households in need. To achieve the goal of producing fifty dwellings per day, each day, the reconstruction program included the participation of a total of two hundred people. The enthusiasm for participating in the rebuilding among earthquake survivors was emblematic in this relief operation. People travelled from far and wide to Guatecruz's rebuilt "seat" in Guatemala City to join the rebuilding campaign for their *pueblo* (village). As the ruins of the demolished communities were

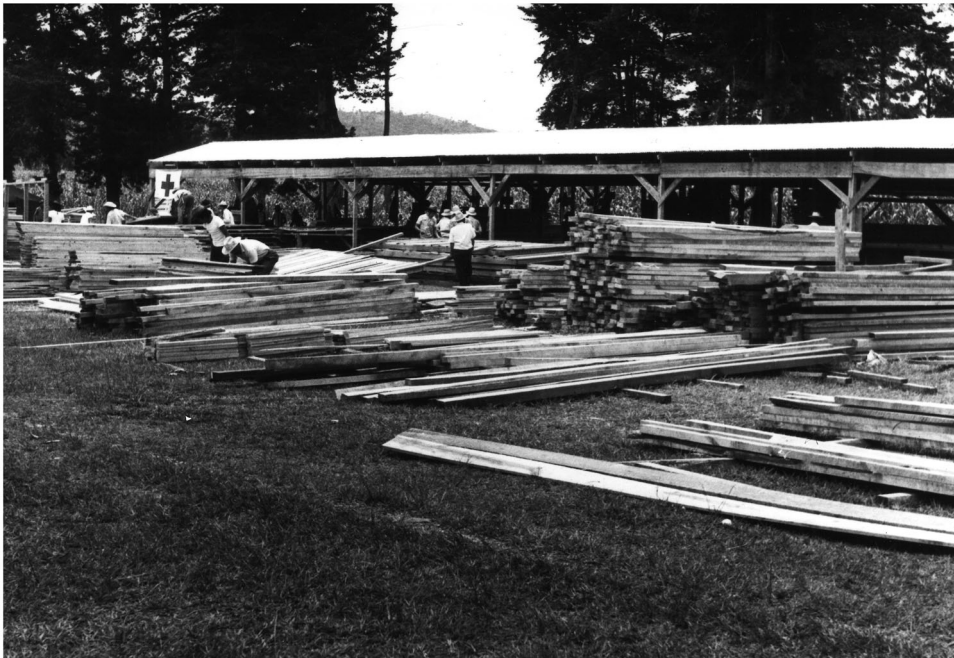


Figure 7. Production and storage of material for the construction of *casitas* in the Chimaltenango region. Source: Swiss Red Cross Archives. The Swiss Red Cross (SRC) has made six images available for use in this academic article, depicting the intervention in Guatemala following the 1976 earthquake. The SRC understands these images to be free of rights and free of charge. The SRC is not aware of any third-party claims arising from copyright or licenses. It cannot, therefore, be held liable for any claims by third parties. Reuse is not permitted.

cleared away, wooden *casitas* sprung up among the hills as symbols of a new governing logic for the disaster-stricken area.⁵⁹

Conclusion

On February 2, 1977, less than a year after the earthquake, the League declared that it had completed its mission. Ten thousand dwellings and sixty communities had been reconstructed.⁶⁰ The initiative had benefited about sixty thousand individuals and provided professional training that could be used in the future. Guatecruz was able to develop itself with the creation of new field offices in different villages. When its Rehabilitation Program was completed, Guatecruz's governing logics had become firmly established in Guatemala. As an NGO operating on government land, it had devised a set of guidelines for organising its territory in the event of future catastrophes, bolstering its readiness, and coordinating post-disaster relief.⁶¹ Guatecruz, in collaboration with multiple state and non-state actors, had effectively established a "governance without government" capable of responding to future disasters.

The actions of Guatecruz illustrate how a non-state actor—through its legal status as an auxiliary body to the Guatemalan government—was able to extend their official seat of governance into multiple "offices" in the field. These field offices served as "extended seats," away from the bureaucratic headquarters, which consisted of action headquarters, temporary and permanent field offices, medical facilities, and storage and distribution centres in the disaster zone. These many field offices enabled Guatecruz to become the primary governing body in a large-scale urban development project which went beyond a mere technical task and responded to a complex network of global governance.

Although this paper sought to explain a specific operational logic, focused on a single organisation, our comprehension of an "architecture of global governance" would be vastly improved if scholars would begin to investigate the governing logics of other humanitarian NGOs. Furthermore, while this paper was predominantly written through the lens of the "donor," we will gain an even better understanding of relief operations when more voices of the "receiver" can be included. While the relief operation of Guatecruz went on to serve as a model for other disaster relief operations, its success by no means ensured that the robust network of field offices would be maintained in conditions fraught with socio-political difficulty. Guatecruz's governing logic had to resist the resumption of the Civil War four months after the relief mission, which was to last another twenty years. In addition, the degree of autonomy that Guatecruz enjoyed in its ability to function in a decentralised manner was curtailed with the passage, in 1996, of the Law of the Coordinator for the Reduction of Disasters of Natural or Provoked Origin. The National Emergency Committee was incorporated into a newly founded governmental organisation that no longer endorsed the League's global governing practices but instead brought disaster prevention and mitigation as well as rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts back to the national level.

Notes on contributors

Cathelijne Nuijsink is a Senior Lecturer at the Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture, ETH Zurich. Her research engages with the development of new historiographic methods that enable histories of architecture in the latter half of the twentieth century to be written in a way that is more dynamic, inclusive, and polyvocal. During the academic years 2022–24 Nuijsink is a Postgraduate Associate in The History, Theory, and Criticism of Architecture and Art (HTC) program at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where she is strengthening further the potential of contact zones as a new historiographic method with the SNF-funded research project “Unlocking the ‘Contact Zone’: Toward a New Historiography of Architecture.”

Annamaria Bonzanigo is a researcher and a practicing architect with experience in the planning and construction of wooden and rammed earth structures. She completed her bachelor’s (2019) and master’s degrees (2022) in architecture at ETH Zurich. During the academic year 2022–2023, she worked as a junior research assistant on topics of coloniality, worldmaking and humanitarianism at the Chair of the History and Theory of Urban Design and taught second-year design studio at the Chair of Architectural Behaviorology, both at ETH Zurich.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to sincerely thank historian Patrick Bondallaz, archivist Marie-Pascale Chassot, and head of international logistics and procurement Daniel Garnier from the Swiss Red Cross in Wabern, the manager of the archives and library services, Grant Mitchell, and Audio-Visual archivist Sarah-Joy Maddeaux from the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) in Geneva, and archivist Fabrizio Bensi from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) for sharing their insights into the mechanisms of their respective societies. The opinions expressed in this publication, however, are those of the authors.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) under [Grant P500PS_202980].

ORCID

Cathelijne Nuijsink  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8900-6529>

Annamaria Bonzanigo  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9367-2778>

Notes

1. Gisela Gellert, “Capítulo 5: Atención de Desastres en Guatemala,” in *Estado, Sociedad y Gestión de los Desastres en América Latina: En Busca del Paradigma Perdido*, ed. Allan Lavell and Eduardo Franco (Lima: La Red de Estudios Sociales en Prevención de Desastres en América Latina, 1996), 20.

2. Susanne Jonas, *The Battle for Guatemala: Rebels, Death Squads, and US Power* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 64–127.
3. Randolph C. Kent, “Reflecting upon a Decade of Disasters: The Evolving Response of the International Community,” *International Affairs* 59, no. 4 (1983): 696.
4. “Guatemala: Tremblement de Terre, 4 février 1976,” *Bureau de Secours, Circulaire* 678, ROP 7604 (V), June 27, 1977, Swiss Federal Archives, Bern (hereafter referred to as Swiss Federal Archives), Swiss Red Cross fonds, J2.15-01#1990-20#75_19.
5. CROSS-Files, Archives Audiovisual Library, “The ICRC during World War I,” *CROSS-Files*, June 3, 2019, <https://blogs.icrc.org/cross-files/the-icrc-during-world-war-i/>.
6. Michael N. Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2011), 30.
7. ICRC, “History—Who we Are,” <https://www.icrc.org/en/who-we-are/history>.
8. The Norwegian Nobel Institute, “League of Red Cross Societies—Facts,” Nobel Prize, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1963/red-cross-league/facts/>.
9. Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, 30.
10. Cathelijne Nuijsink and Fatina Abreek-Zubiedat, “Writing Alternative Histories of Disaster Relief: Architecture and Humanitarianism,” conference session to the Society of Architectural Historians Annual Conference, Montréal, April 12–16, 2023.
11. Karns, Mingst, and Stiles, *International Organisations*, 12, 15.
12. “Auxiliary Role,” IFRC, <https://www.ifrc.org/who-we-are/international-red-cross-and-red-crescent-movement/national-societies/auxiliary-role>.
13. The auxiliary role of the national Red Cross societies justifies the close collaboration between Guatecruz and the Guatemala Government in the 1976 relief operation. Kapila, “The Red Cross and Red Crescent,” 185.
14. Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, 105. Barnett does not talk specifically about Guatecruz but explains that in the post war period there was a tendency to affiliate “official” humanitarianism with organisations like the ICRC.
15. Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, 31.
16. Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, 2.
17. Lukas Schemper, “Humanity Unprepared: International Organization and the Management of Natural Disaster (1921–1991)” (PhD diss., Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies Geneva, 2016), 371.
18. Lukas Schemper, “Humanity Unprepared,” 372.
19. Ilhan Luthem, “The United Nations Disaster Relief Coordinator (UNDRO),” *Journal of the World Association for Emergency and Disaster Medicine* 1, Supplement 1 (1985): 302.
20. Daphne A. Reid and Patrick F. Gilbo, *Beyond Conflict: The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 1919–1994* (Geneva: International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 1997), 208–43.
21. Henrik Beer and E.V Bighinatti, “Guatemala: Earthquake,” *League of Red Cross Societies Relief Bureau Circular* 607, February 5, 1976. Swiss Federal Archives, Swiss Red Cross fonds, J2.15-01#1990-20#75_19.
22. Latin America scholar Susanne Jonas has pointed out that the population most affected by the earthquake were the people living in the Highlands, which created an even bigger social divide. Jonas, *The Battle for Guatemala*, 124.
23. Alan Riding, “More Than 800 Die in Guatemala Quake: Toll is Expected to Reach 2,500,” *New York Times*, February 5, 1976, 65.
24. Alan Riding, “Relief Aid say 3,000 Died in Quake in Guatemala: Relief Officials,” *New York Times*, February 6, 1976, 1.
25. Telegraph message from Enrique Cañas and Bermudes to Guatemalan Red Cross, February 10, 1976, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies Archives, Geneva (hereafter referred to as IFRC Archives), Box 999475.
26. Many relief organisations, including the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Health Organization (WHO), the Food and

- Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the World Bank, and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development Work used a delegate on site, tasked with reporting to their headquarters. See Kent, “Reflecting upon a Decade of Disasters,” 701.
27. While the position of Delegate stills exists within the Red Cross (ICRC offers positions for “delegates” and the IFRC for “security delegates”), its role today is less expansive. Many responsibilities, such as camp assessment (roads, water evacuation), have been taken over by the UNHCR. Nowadays, a team of people is responsible, rather than a single person. Daniel Garnier (Head of International Logistics & Procurement), interview with authors at the Swiss Red Cross in Wabern, September 8, 2022.
 28. Telex from Guatemalan Red Cross to League of Red Cross Societies, February 11, 1976, IFRC Archives, Box 999475.
 29. Garnier, interview, September 8, 2022.
 30. James P. Sterba, “Earthquake Toll in Guatemala now Nearing 19,000,” *New York Times*, February 12, 1976, 3.
 31. Henrik Beer and E.V. Bighinatti, “Guatemala: Earthquake Situation Report No. 1,” *League of Red Cross Societies Relief Bureau Circular* 608, February 10, 1976, ROP 7604 (b), Swiss Federal Archives, Swiss Red Cross fonds, J2.15-01#1990-20#75_19.
 32. “Conflicto Estudiantil de San Marcos sin Resolverse,” *Prensa Libre*, March 15, 1976, 37.
 33. Letter from Armando Amado to Henrik Beer, February 9, 1976, IFRC Archives, Box 999475.
 34. The collaboration between the National Emergency Committee and the Red Cross was essential, as the authorities were neither prepared nor equipped to work in such an extended manner in the territory, as most means of communication had been centralised in the capital. Miguel A. Balcárcel and Oscar René Orellana, “El proceso de Reconstrucción de Guatemala,” in *Memorias del Simposio Internacional sobre el Terremoto de Guatemala del 4 de febrero de 1976 y el Proceso de Reconstrucción*, vol. 1 (Guatemala: Centro de Estudios Mesoamericanos sobre Tecnología Apropriadada, 1978), 588–645.
 35. League of Red Cross Societies, “Action de Secours Croix-Rouge au Guatemala,” February 13, 1976, internal communication, Swiss Red Cross Archives, Box Latein-Amerika.
 36. Henrik Beer and E.V. Bighinatti, “Guatemala: Earthquake Situation Report No. 3,” *League of Red Cross Societies Relief Bureau Circular* 611, February 12, 1976, ROP 7604 (d), Swiss Federal Archives, Swiss Red Cross fonds, J2.15-01#1990-20#75_19.
 37. Beer and Bighinatti, “Guatemala: Earthquake.” For information on how Guatecruz put the Central American societies “in charge” of specific tent cities/towns, see *League of Red Cross Societies Relief Bureau Circular* 607, February 5, 1976, Swiss Federal Archives, Swiss Red Cross fonds, J2.15-01#1990-20#75_19. For precise information on who sent what, and who worked where, see: IFRC Archives, Box 999475.
 38. René Carrillo, “Note for the File—ROP 7604,” February 16, 1976, IFRC Archives, Box 999475.
 39. Alan Riding, “U.S. Food Aid Seen Hurting Guatemala: Donations Sent after 1976 Quake were Not Needed and Damaged Grain Market, Experts Say,” *New York Times*, November 6, 1977.
 40. Alan Riding, “U.S. Food Aid Seen Hurting Guatemala.”
 41. Henrik Beer and J.P. Robert-Tissot, “Guatemala: Earthquake Situation Report No. 5,” *League of Red Cross Societies Relief Bureau Circular* 613 (February 16, 1976), ROP 7604 (f), Swiss Federal Archives, Swiss Red Cross fonds, J2.15-01#1990-20#75_19.
 42. It is important to note that lobbying focused on maintaining economic relations with the United States at the expense of Guatemala’s own Indian population, on supporting the commonly neglected people living in the Highlands for the sake of international goodwill, and on sending the majority of humanitarian aid to the severely damaged rural areas surrounding Guatemala City, while ignoring the capital city’s decimated slums. See

- Alan Riding, "Earthquake Relief in Guatemala Appears to Neglect the Stricken City Slums, and Politics May Be Part of It," *New York Times*, February 22, 1976, 13.
43. The National Emergency Committee made the final decisions regarding which organisation would operate where, thus demonstrating that the earthquake granted this military organisation control over areas it had previously not taken into consideration. Manuel Angel Castillo, "La planificación en Guatemala," *México, Citgua, Cuadernos* 4, nos. 15–16 (1987), 13.
 44. Robert G. Fullmer and Comité de Enlace de Agencias Voluntarias, "Boletín del Comité de Enlace de Agencias Voluntarias," February 26, 1976, Swiss Federal Archives, Swiss Red Cross fonds, J2.15-01#1990-20#75_19.
 45. Juan Pekmez, "Fin de la phase d'urgence," *Faits Facts Hechos Red Cross News and Features for National Societies, Press, Radio and Television*, May 4, 1976, 14, Swiss Federal Archives, Swiss Red Cross fonds, J2.15-01#1990-20#75_19.
 46. Beer and Bighinatti, "Guatemala: Earthquake," ROP 7604 (I), Swiss Federal Archives, Swiss Red Cross fonds, J2.15-01#1990-20#75_19.
 47. Juan Pekmez on behalf of the League of Red Cross Societies, "Photo-souvenir d'une famille heureuse," April 13, 1976, Swiss Red Cross Archives, Box Latein-Amerika.
 48. Beer and Bighinatti, "Guatemala: Earthquake."
 49. Juan Pekmez, "El Progreso chasse ses mauvais souvenirs à la pelle et au bulldozer," *Faits Facts Hechos Red Cross News and Features for National Societies, Press, Radio and Television*, April 6, 1976, 7, Swiss Federal Archives, Swiss Red Cross fonds, J2.15-01#1990-20#75_19.
 50. Juan Pekmez, "Photo-souvenir d'une famille heureuse."
 51. Spatial Agency, "Participation, 1969–1979," <https://www.spatialagency.net/database/participation.1970s>.
 52. Juan Pekmez, "El Progreso, un chantier en effervescence," *Faits Facts Hechos Red Cross News and Features for National Societies, Press, Radio and Television*, March 31, 1976, 4, Swiss Federal Archives, Swiss Red Cross fonds, J2.15-01#1990-20#75_19.
 53. Jonas, *The Battle for Guatemala*, 125.
 54. Larry Rohter, "Guatemala Digs Up Army's Secret Cemeteries," *New York Times*, June 7, 1997, 1.
 55. Juan Pekmez, "Le transfert de responsabilités de la Ligue à la Croix-Rouge du Guatemala," *Faits Facts Hechos Red Cross News and Features for National Societies, Press, Radio and Television*, April 7, 1976, Swiss Federal Archives, Swiss Red Cross fonds, J2.15-01#1990-20#75_19.
 56. Juan Pekmez, "Le développement de la Croix-Rouge du Guatemala," *Faits Facts Hechos Red Cross News and Features for National Societies, Press, Radio and Television*, April 23, 1976, 13, Swiss Federal Archives, Swiss Red Cross fonds, J2.15-01#1990-20#75_19.
 57. Juan Pekmez, "Fin de la Phase d'Urgence," *Faits Facts Hechos Red Cross News and Features for National Societies, Press, Radio and Television*, May 4, 1976, 14, Swiss Federal Archives, Swiss Red Cross fonds, J2.15-01#1990-20#75_19.
 58. James P. Muldoon, Jr, "Introduction: In Search of Global Governance," in *The Architecture of Global Governance: An Introduction to the Study of International Organizations* (London: Routledge, 2004), 10.
 59. J.-M. Goodstikker, "Guatemala: Neuf mois de reconstruction 8,300 maisons achevées et attribuées," *Faits Facts Hechos Red Cross News and Features for National Societies, Press, Radio and Television*, December 16, 1976, 32, Swiss Federal Archives, Swiss Red Cross fonds, J2.15-01#1990-20#75_19.
 60. League of Red Cross Societies, "Guatemala l'objectif de 10'000 maisons atteint en moins d'un an," *Faits Facts Hechos Red Cross News and Features for National Societies, Press, Radio and Television*, February 2, 1977, Swiss Federal Archives, Swiss Red Cross fonds, J2.15-01#1990-20#75_19.
 61. Miguel A. Balcárcel and Oscar René Orellana, "El proceso de Reconstrucción de Guatemala," 588–645.