

# The challenges of a Brazilian civil defence agent

**Emily Hough** speaks to Elton Cesar Cunha, Municipal Director of Protection and Civil Defence of Barra Velha, about his work in this small city on the Brazilian coast, a city that has its fair share of risks and hazards



Cunha graduated in Logistics from the University of Vale do Itajaí and is an academic in Mathematics, as well as having taken courses in the area of disaster management. He has worked with the Civil

Defence in Brazil since 2011.

To start, he outlines the country's civil protection and defence system, explaining that its foundations go back to 1942, when Brazil entered the Second World War. After many reorganisations, the last being in 2012, the Brazilian Civil Defence system is now divided into three interdependent levels – National, State, and Municipal – that each have their specific missions. “At a municipal level, the Barra Velha Municipal Civil Defence Council was created in 1984 to help the victims of a great flood that struck the municipality and state that year,” Cunha explains. “But this drew upon public officials from other sectors when undertaking humanitarian aid activities.”

The Municipal Civil Defence was created as an autonomous department linked to the mayor's office in 2011 – Cunha was its first member, tasked exclusively with risk and disaster management activities.

In 2018, co-ordination was reformulated for municipal protection and the Civil Defence Directorate was linked to the mayor's office, giving it more autonomy and responsibilities. Says Cunha: “In that same year, I was elected to the position of Regional Co-ordinator of Civil Defence of the Amvali Thematic council – Association of Municipalities of the Itapocu Valley. This covers the seven cities of the Itapocu River basin, responsible for promoting regional protection and defence policies, prevention and environmental education.”

Barra Velha was an old whaling port until the beginning of the 20th century; it is a quiet tourist town of immigrant fishermen from the Azores (Portugal) on the northern coast of the State of Santa Catarina, southern Brazil, with an estimated population of 28,463 inhabitants. In high season, its population can reach 100,000.

The port has beaches with pleasant temperatures and is a great lure for those who want quality of life and a healthy retirement.

“The geomorphology of this small municipality is that of a plain, belonging to the hydrographic basin of the Itapocu River at its mouth, and its beaches are bathed by the Atlantic Ocean,” explains Cunha.

Despite its apparent tranquillity, Barra Velha is

not immune to nature's actions, being one of the 821 municipalities with the highest occurrences of 'natural' disasters among Brazil's 5,570 municipalities.

“I am not comfortable with the term natural disasters,” notes Cunha, “because of the broader and more intrinsic aspect of how we should approach natural actions in the environment in which we live, given the vulnerabilities that communities are exposed to.

“The most logical and appropriate characterisation and description of such occurrences would be 'socio-environmental disasters', focusing on human vulnerability and not on meteorological, climatic or technological actions.”

## Coastal erosion

He continues: “The most relevant aspects of disaster occurrences on our coast are subtropical storms and consequent sudden floods, owing to polar air mass shocks, with hot air coming from mid-west and southeast Brazil. We also have extra-tropical cyclones that result in overhangs and coastal erosion, destroying houses and public roads very close to the sea.

“Being a seaside town, we also deal with unusual situations such as the stranding of humpback whales in the times of migration to the Antarctic, as well as turtles and other marine animals,” he says.

The city of Barra Velha entered the UNISDR Global Disaster Reduction Campaign in October 2013, with the aim of meeting pre-established goals and adapting to the UN Resilient Cities programme.

“In fact, this was an important step since when I joined the Municipal Civil Defence in 2011, I only had a small old table and a laptop bought with my own resources in a room provided by the Santa Catarina Fire Department,” he reminisces.

“At that time, the concepts of civil defence and risk and disaster management were far removed from the political heads and local population,” Cunha continues. “The decision to place me in charge was to soften a corruption scandal involving former municipal officials and the misappropriation of public money that the state had released to the Civil Defence to be employed in the municipality after a meteorological event.”

He jokes wryly, saying that he did not start in this department from scratch, but rather from ten negative ones: “The challenge in front of me and my only experience in this area until then, had been



Elton Cesar Cunha is Municipal Director of Protection and Civil Defence for Barra Velha

a monograph on humanitarian logistics that I had carried out to graduate from the University of Vale do Itajaí. However, I went ahead and decided to turn my back on a shameful incident in our city and seek qualification, work, restructuring and respect for the population, state and federal government.”

He continues: “My baptism of fire was on April 10, 2013, with a storm where heavy rains accumulated around 210mm of rain – a month's worth – in a time period of just six hours. The precarious drainage of the municipality could not cope, and some 80 per cent of the urban area was flooded; whole communities were isolated.”

Cunha immediately requested operational assistance from State Civil Defence, the Fire Department, Lions Club, city hall staff and volunteers. “We were able to manage the humanitarian needs in a very effective way. And from this, I gained the strength and a firm footing to make the necessary decisions concerning humanitarian aid and, later, in reconstruction of affected areas,” he says.

“This was a hard lesson, where I graduated to life and earned the recognition from my colleagues and the wider population that was needed to advance my work with respect and dignity.”

On the wave of this subsequent enthusiasm, Cunha's department worked in a cohesive manner to encourage other public and private sector actors to work for the local Civil Defence on a voluntary basis.

“I was able to complete the second cycle of implementation of the Hyogo Framework for Action as part of the UN's global Building Resilient Cities campaign,” he says. In 2014: “We were



**Above:** The seaside town also deals with unusual situations, such as the stranding of humpback whales

Author image

the first city of the State of Santa Catarina and the 18th Brazilian city to conquer this stage.”

Yet there are many challenges ahead, he tells me, most notably infrastructure issues, disaster-related public policies, and instilling a culture of prevention in society.

“But we are taking small steps,” Cunha says. “Slow but firm steps, with the help of volunteers, and public and private entities engaged in a common good.

“We are moving forward to create a society that respects nature and that is resilient, knowing we are in the centre of – and not outside – the natural environment and its dynamics,” he concludes.

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**Below:** Elton Cesar Cunha observing coastal damage with State Civil Defence Representative Osvaldo Gonçalves

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