Bites by SELA
A taste of regional economics

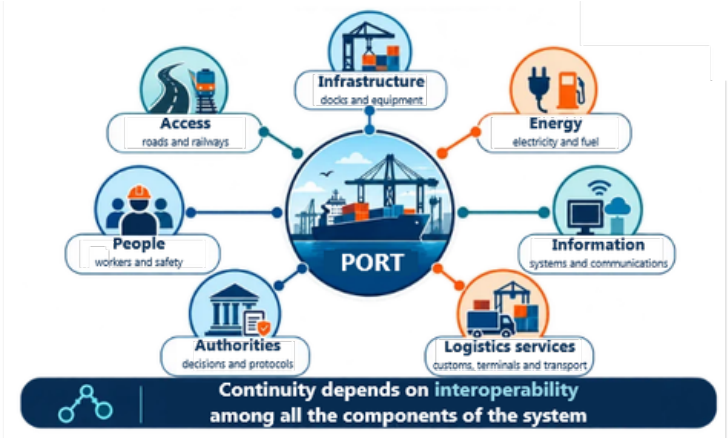
The Panama earthquake: the architecture of a response

Earthquakes continue to test the resilience of Latin America and the Caribbean. On 9 October 2026, a 7.5-magnitude earthquake struck Panama, a country of strategic importance for international trade. **What enables a port system to adapt, respond and resume operations quickly?**

The reality is that business continuity does not necessarily mean keeping all facilities open. Following the earthquake, some facilities suspended their operations as a precautionary measure in order to evacuate staff and carry out structural inspections, while others continued to provide specific services or gradually resumed their activities.

On the one hand, Balboa and Cristóbal resumed operations the day after the earthquake, once again reaching 100% of their operational capacity. At Almirante and Pedregal, although restrictions remained in place, departure procedures continued, demonstrating that a facility can limit certain functions without suspending all its services.

On the other hand, the recovery was constrained by factors that went beyond the condition of the port itself. It had not been possible to access Puerto Búcaro due to the condition of the access road; at El Agallito, the quay remained closed while the offices were operating normally. The Panama Maritime Authority (AMP) also noted that some limitations were due to the situation of workers, prioritising their safety and the care of their families.



The lesson is clear: a port does not operate in isolation. Its continuity depends on roads, energy, communications, workers and authorities capable of coordinating decisions and exchanging information. If one link in the logistics chain fails, operations may be restricted even when a terminal is fully operational.

Advance preparation also matters. Panama had planned to hold the III National Evacuation Drill on 12 October, but the exercise was suspended so that resources could be focused on dealing with the emergency. This planning highlights the importance of having protocols and coordination mechanisms in place before a disaster strikes. **The result?** Four days after the earthquake, the resumption of 80% of the suspended port activities had been authorised, to take place gradually and in accordance with the conditions at each port.



Japan offers another lesson on the importance of coordination. Following the earthquake on the Noto Peninsula in January 2024, the national government temporarily took over the management of certain port facilities to enable the transport of supplies and speed up the recovery. Building on this experience, Japan introduced measures to strengthen logistics continuity in the event of future disasters, including the improvement of port continuity plans, the rapid assessment of facilities and coordination between authorities and operators.

What does this mean for Latin America and the Caribbean?
Port resilience requires much more than just secure infrastructure. We need full interoperability, so that authorities, terminals and operators can share information and coordinate decisions, and multimodal connectivity, to link up maritime, road and rail transport.

Strengthening these capabilities means investing in more resilient logistics chains and less vulnerable regional trade. Are we prepared to keep trade moving?

Alixis Mariño