



# Disaster management in the Caribbean

The Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Secretariat and the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA)

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The geographic location of the Caribbean makes it vulnerable to natural hazards, especially extreme weather and seismic events. In the last two decades alone, the Caribbean has borne a large burden in terms of loss of life and property due to various natural disasters, and in the case of Montserrat, volcanic eruptions.

An indication of the extent of this damage can be gleaned from research by the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) of the impact of natural disasters on four selected territories and countries in the Region – the Cayman Islands, Grenada, Jamaica and Haiti, over the 24-year period 1980-2004. That study indicated that more than 8,000 lives were lost; nearly six million people, that is, more than 50 per cent of the combined population of the countries being researched – were affected; and an estimated US\$5.6 billion in damage was sustained. A number of regional experts has projected that for damage of this magnitude, the recovery period of countries range between 5 and 15 years.

The 2008 hurricane period, in addition to being extremely active, indicated how small events like short periods of storm surges can significantly affect Caribbean Community Member States. During the period 15th August to 8th September 2008 a total of five tropical cyclones were formed in the Atlantic and posed major threats to the Caribbean. One of these systems, Tropical Storm Josephine expired without any effect on the Caribbean Community, while Tropical Storm Fay and hurricanes Gustav, Hanna and Ike impacted the Bahamas, Haiti, Jamaica and the Turks and Caicos Islands. Even as Hanna was exiting the Turks and Caicos Islands, Hurricane Ike was on a direct path to Grand Turk as a Category Four hurricane. These systems also impacted on Cuba, causing significant damage and in the case of Haiti hundreds of deaths and the displacement of more than two million people.

Trinidad and Tobago experienced heavy rainfall on

23rd and 27th August and 7th September 2008. On 23rd August, the severe weather went on past Trinidad to develop into Gustav. Rainfall in excess of 75mm was recorded on 23rd August 2008, and in excess of 100mm in some areas on 27th August 2008. The main impact from the weather systems this year was flooding due to storm surge, except for Hurricane Ike which struck the Turks and Caicos Islands and the Southern Bahamas as a Category Four Hurricane causing severe wind damage. Given the intensity of Hurricane Ike, and heavy rains and flooding associated with the other systems during this period, it is significant to note that in the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA) Participating States<sup>1</sup> only 25 deaths were recorded.

The full socio-economic impact of these systems is still being assessed. The impacts of the 2008 hurricane season have raised a number of challenges that require urgent, namely:

1. The delay in providing an initial Statement on impact, which presents a challenge in framing interest on the event as one requiring external support;
2. Adequacy of National Emergency Supplies: there appears to be no connection between the warehouse supplies and the character of the hazard being prepared for;
3. The national readiness process remains difficult to gauge despite the flurry of activities prior to and at the beginning of the hurricane season. Information provided in briefings does not clearly relate to capacity to undertake tasks and limited data on emergency resources is available;
4. The key National Emergency Services Infrastructure in many countries is inadequate.

## A brief review of hazard risk management in the Caribbean

In the Caribbean, the capacity to respond to natural disasters has been evolving from the traditional



disaster management approach which focused almost exclusively on actions that could be taken immediately prior to, during, or shortly after a disaster event to reduce economic damage and loss of life. Under this scenario, the government was seen as having the sole responsibility for the management of disasters. In recent years this has been changing to include natural hazard risk management, in addition to preparedness, response, and recovery planning and management. In the new approach, natural hazard risk management is significantly different from the traditional preparedness and response activities and greater attention is being given to prevention measures such as ensuring that the physical planning processes address the likelihood of hazards and their interaction with environmental concerns and institutional systems. In this context it is anticipated that hazard exposure would be fully incorporated and mainstreamed into all aspects of development planning and policy making.

More importantly, Disaster Management in CARICOM is led by the CDEMA (formerly CDERA)<sup>2</sup>, who, recognising the link between disasters and the sustainable development of the community, spearheaded the adoption of a strategic framework for Comprehensive Disaster Management (CDM) in 2001. The strategic objective of CDM is the integration of disaster management considerations into the development planning and decision-making process. CDM has provided a platform for the harnessing of regional stakeholders and resources in support of disaster management. With the embracing of CDM by the Region and against a background of recent global catastrophes, there is now an intense desire among disaster management stakeholders in the Caribbean to accelerate initiatives in promoting disaster loss reduction. The Region through the 2005-15 Programming Framework has outlined priority themes and associated outcomes as a mechanism for channeling the interventions of stakeholders wishing to support the building of resilient communities.

After five years, the CDM strategy has been reviewed and re-articulated within a Results Based Framework. Partners and stakeholders in 2006 agreed on four priority outcomes to inform programming support over the next five years, 2007-12. These are:

1. Enhanced institutional support for programme implementation at national and regional levels;
2. Establishment of an effective mechanism and programme for the management of comprehensive disaster management knowledge;

3. Mainstreaming of disaster management knowledge in key sectors at national level; and

4. Enhanced community resilience in CDERA Participating States to mitigate and respond to the effects of climate change and disasters.

These efforts are complemented by the establishment of the Disaster Mitigation Facility for the Caribbean (DMFC) within the Caribbean Development Bank, which should enhance the potential for integration of risk management into the Region's development agenda.

### Concluding remarks

A key element on the issue of disaster management in the Region is one of building resilience mechanisms. An important feature of these mechanisms is the capacity for expanding the scope for collaboration and effective action to address both preparedness for disasters and post-disaster efforts. This and other elements emanated from a broad-based Stakeholder Consultation, which informed the Community's adoption in 2001, of the CDM strategy and results framework and its further enhancement in 2007. This CDM strategy and framework encompasses an integrated approach to disaster risk reduction and focuses on all hazards that threaten the Caribbean Region, all phases of the disaster management cycle – prevention, mitigation, preparedness, response, recovery and rebuilding – and all sectors of society it is anticipated will become an integral part of the process.

However, with the advent of global warming and change in climate patterns it is predicted that these events will be more frequent and of greater magnitude. This means that there is an urgent need to upscale our response capacity in the wake of floods, tropical cyclones, drought and landslides. Addressing these challenges would require that support for the National Disaster Offices (NDO) in the Caribbean and their programmes must be more sustained. In addressing this task the subject of disaster risk reduction must be given the political urgency and attention required. Disaster risk reduction and climate change must be fully integrated into national strategic plans and regional cooperation mechanisms. Finally, more attention must also be paid to public awareness and education. ■

It is anticipated that hazard exposure would be fully incorporated and mainstreamed into all aspects of development planning and policy making

1 In 2008 Haiti was not a member of CDEMA. Reported death toll was approximated at 500.  
2 The Members of CDEMA are all CARICOM Member States as well as Anguilla, the Virgin Islands and the Turks and Caicos Islands.