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## **Disaster management in the Caribbean: possibilities for critical policy links and consolidation**

*Disaster management in the Caribbean:  
possibilities for critical policy links and consolidation*

Prepared by Mr. Jeremy Collymore  
Coordinator, Caribbean Disaster Emergency Response Agency (CDERA)  
for the Forum of Ministers of the Environment of Latin America and the Caribbean  
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Mr. Jeremy Collymore  
Caribbean Disaster Emergency Response Agency  
The Garrison, Saint Michael, Barbados  
Tel. N° 246 436-9651 Fax N° 246 437-7649 email: [cdera@caribsurf.com](mailto:cdera@caribsurf.com)

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## I. Abstract

1. In the Caribbean, new thresholds in disaster management in the past have traditionally followed the impact of major catastrophic events.
2. Whilst event impact and experience will continue to influence the speed and nature of the institutional arrangements for disaster management, emerging geo-political forces and agenda will play an increasing role in framing the evolving institutional framework.
3. Resource scarcity, globalisation of the issues of coastal zone management, vulnerability reduction, climate change and sustainable development and poverty will create new opportunities for promoting the agenda of disaster management and its interface with development and environmental policies and programmes.
4. Recommendations for preparing for and embracing this opportunity for an integrated and comprehensive approach to disaster management are offered for the consideration of the Forum of Ministers of the Environment of Latin America and the Caribbean.

## II. Introduction

5. Caribbean island states and Latin American countries have had an extensive history of hazard impact resulting in substantial economic loss and social dislocation.
6. Recent experiences of the 1990s have generated much discussion on whether or not we are moving into a new cycle of increased frequency and intensity of hazard events. Of equal concern is whether the flood events in Central America in 1998, the flood episode in Venezuela in 1999 and the Lenny experience in the Eastern Caribbean are now exposing the fragility of our development interventions or the vulnerability created by them.
7. The outcome is a growing recognition that the survivability of our society and economy will be very much influenced by what is done to reduce our vulnerability to natural hazards. This connection between sustainable development and natural hazards has become too overwhelming to ignore. Also becoming increasingly evident are the limitations to hazard resilience posed by poverty and underdevelopment (Berke 1997; Collymore et al 1994; Pulwarty and Riebsane 1998).

## III. Framing the intervention

8. Despite the long history of economic setbacks resulting from hazard impacts, Latin America and the Caribbean Governments have traditionally paid little attention to altering the conditions of vulnerability. Considerable investment has been directed at mitigating the post-impact humanitarian crises associated with hazard events.
9. In the last 20 years, in the Caribbean there has emerged an agenda to develop and maintain an institutional framework and capacity for advancing disaster preparedness and to a lesser extent mitigation. The legal status of the national focal points leading these efforts and their resourcing still present many opportunities for enhancement.

**10.** The disconnection between our hazard loss experiences and our disaster initiatives suggests that few governments recognise the long-term economic implications of disasters, especially on their debt structure and the role hazard mitigation can play in easing economic problems (NATSIOS).

**11.** In many situations it is noted that the passing of regulations and development of technology have not impacted loss reduction behaviour and practice. It may be suggested that this in part reflects the need for more to be paid on how one can alter the structure of the market as a medium for promoting desired behaviour and practice (Schultze 1997).

**12.** Disaster management has become a policy problem of global scope which requires the examination of ways in which modern developments magnify the vulnerability of human communities to natural and other hazards, and also the opportunities for reducing this. (White 1986 in Kates, Hewitt 1983).

**13.** It calls for a conscious policy that recognises and addresses the link between land use decisions and settlement policy and the dramatic increase in hazard exposure (UNDP 1991).

**14.** Current and future disaster management agendas must also face the challenges that disaster reduction measures must be met in the fact of unmet capital investment needs, demands for more extensive and efficient cost recovery and shifting focus of financial support.

**15.** The context of the above, the traditional ad hoc event driven piecemeal approach to disaster management are immediately archaic and will accelerate the discontinuity between policy objective and results.

**16.** Linking disaster management to development and the environment increases the range of the stakeholders engaged in the policy discourse and will require some adjustments in the institutional arrangements. Partnering with other programmes in climate change, sea-level rise, poverty reduction and public sector reform can create the synergies necessary to get the whole and integrated approach necessary for disaster reduction.

#### **IV. Current forces driving disaster reduction**

**17.** The forces facilitating the move directly address natural disaster reduction issues (OAS 2000). These include:

- a) Increasing loss of human life and property;
- b) Significant disruption of lending programs and reprogramming of capital resources for reconstruction;
- c) The perception that natural hazards events, particularly meteorological and hydrologic events, are increasing in severity and frequency;
- d) A response to suggested direct links between climate change and the severity and frequency of atmospheric events;
- e) The desire to implement previously mandated plans of actions dealing with the vulnerability, particularly in small island developing states;
- f) Growing use of risk information in evaluating international investments; a growing recognition of the link between losses and availability of insurance for the private sector;

- g) An incipient recognition that low risk to losses due to natural hazard events, particularly in public infrastructure, may become an effective marketing tool in attracting foreign investment;

**18.** It is in the context of the above that the following recommendations for promoting the enhancement of and cooperation in, disaster management in Latin America and the Caribbean are being made.

## **V. Recommendations for improving institutional capacity and cooperation in disaster management in Latin America and the Caribbean**

### **5.1. General**

**19.** These recommendations are intended for high level policy makers at the national level.

- a) Develop and exchange an overall vision for sustainability around a common goal which inform agency cooperation and support at national and regional levels.
- b) Use inter-ministerial and inter-sectoral consultations at the national level to create awareness of the linkages between development, vulnerability and its reduction at the highest levels.
- c) Share experiences in agricultural and infrastructural vulnerability reduction through horizontal cooperation and/or existing regional and sub-regional organizations.
- d) Establish national focal points for disaster management with adequate legislative authority.
- e) Appoint leaders of the national focal points at the levels and with the status necessary to engage the other sector leaders.

### **5.2. Enhancing or initiating disaster management consideration in development planning**

**20.** Latin America and the Caribbean Governments must move swiftly to integrate disaster management considerations into the development planning process if this is to be sustainable. In this regard, Governments will be required to undertake the following:

- a) Review the intra and inter agency dynamics to include an analysis of the decision making infrastructure in the public sector.
- b) Take on board longer term comprehensive and integrated approaches to risk mitigation.
- c) Identify a management strategy that balances current actions with losses from future disaster events.
- d) Implement mitigation activities to reduce the long-term risk to human life and property from natural and technological hazards to include land use regulation, building and safety codes and disaster insurance.
- e) Pre-planning for post disaster reduction to ensure that an effective and rapid recovery occurs within the framework of the re-establishment of strong socio-economic systems.

- f) Encourage the development and sharing of best practices vulnerability assessment and mapping.
- g) Invite organizations of the Inter-American System to express their strong support for, and of, the national and regional efforts to reduce vulnerability through
  - i) The review of their programme interventions to determine how these contribute to increased vulnerability or can promote disaster reduction.
  - ii) Inventorying existing programmes in vulnerability assessment and disaster reduction, identifying best practices, promotion and dissemination of case studies in vulnerability reduction.
  - iii) Establishment of common programming goals and promote shared financing of interventions, where appropriate, within the organisations of the Inter-American system.
  - iv) Joint member states in lobbying for and soliciting resources to finance vulnerability assessment programmes.
  - v) Promotion of vulnerability assessment as a core medium for linking disaster, environmental and development issues.

### **5.3. Governmental efforts**

**21.** In further expression of support for safer communities and reduced disaster losses in the region, the Meeting of Environmental Ministers is invited to encourage their Governments to:

- a) Express in a formal way, the political will to reduce vulnerability, through legislation or policy decisions at the highest level, which would require the progressive implementation of disaster assessment and reduction plans at the national and community levels.
- b) Encourage continued mobilization of domestic resources for disaster reduction activities.
- c) Develop a risk assessment programme and emergency plans in order to focus efforts on disaster preparedness, response and mitigation, and to design projects for sub-regional, regional and international cooperation, as appropriate.

### **5.4. Economic Preparedness Planning Programme**

**22.** The economic impact and dislocation resulting from hazard impacts on our communities are already noted. Against this background, the Conference is being invited to urge countries to engage in and promote Economic Preparedness Planning.

**23.** Economic Preparedness Planning explicitly recognised the susceptibility of our economies to the hazards to which they are exposed. Its agenda and mechanism are founded on the inevitable truth that disaster management must now be mainstreamed in the critical corridors of decision making and economic planning.

**24.** Economic Preparedness Planning is a critical element of a National Vulnerability Reduction Programme and is focussed on the development of plans and programmes designed to stimulate economic recovery in the aftermath of a disaster.



**25.** Latin American and Caribbean Governments are encouraged to undertake the following in their efforts to promote Economic Preparedness Planning:

- a) Expansion of national capacity to conduct salvage recovery.
- b) Development of standby programmes for economic assistance; including programmes for families, farmers, small business and the recovery of lost business at the community level.
- c) Established arrangements for the access and use of Foreign Aid.
- d) Reprogramming Foreign Aid and National Debt.

### **5.5. Financing the changing agenda**

**26.** As the disaster management agenda seeks to incorporate and accommodate development and environmental considerations, the financial requirements will also necessitate a refocus.

**27.** The frequency and magnitude of disaster events will continue to place demands for short-term response resources. It is therefore important that short-term humanitarian programmes be considered in initiating reduction interventions.

**28.** In addition, it is recommended that Governments consider the following mechanisms for financing reduction programmes:

- a) Establish national mitigation funds through penalties and disincentives levied on developments in high risk areas, contributions from private sector and debt for mitigation programmes.
- b) Create policy links between Special Development Areas and Hazard Zones to encourage the incorporation of mitigation considerations in the design and siting of capital investment projects.
- c) Lobby bilateral agencies and donor governments for debt relief for mitigation initiative programmes.
- d) Develop National Reduction Partnership Programmes with the environmental, agricultural, poverty reduction and settlement sectors to broaden the resource base for implementing mitigation programmes.
- e) Engage the Multilateral Financial Institutions in the development of time-sensitive recovery financing mechanisms.

## **VI. Implementing the agenda**

**29.** During the 1990s International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, recommendations for national, regional and international actions in disaster reduction

- a) Caribbean IDNDR Meeting, Kingston, Jamaica, May 1992
- b) World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction, Yokohama, Japan, May 1994.
- c) IDNDR Hemispheric Meeting, San Jose, Costa Rica, June 1999
- d) IDNDR Programme Forum: Partnership for a Safer World in the 21<sup>st</sup>. Century, Geneva, Switzerland, July 1999.
- e) Third Caribbean Conference on Natural Hazards, Barbados, October 1999.

**30.** In all of these, a common theme of experience sharing was evident. More or new mechanisms emerged to coordinate regional activities in disaster management e.g. CDERA and CEPREDENAC. The signing of an Agreement between Member States and Associate Members of the ACS for Regional Cooperation on Natural Disasters has added another layer of governmental intent of cooperation in the advocacy, development and sharing of policy experiences in disaster management.

**31.** The foundation for this cooperation and action at the national level is generally weak. It is in the context of this desire to promote a common framework for consolidating our disaster reduction agenda that the recommendations herein have been offered.

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