



Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA) Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean, San José, Costa Rica

DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

Regional Forum Explores Community-Level DRR

Representatives from community-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs), universities, and disaster management organizations from the region recently gathered to share successes and challenges in helping vulnerable communities identify and reduce disaster risks.

The discussions took place during the first Latin American and Caribbean Forum on Community-Level Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR), organized by USAID/OFDA in coordination with the U.N. International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) and held on January 29 and 30 in Sonsonate, El Salvador.

The event provided an opportunity for local NGOs that have implemented community-level DRR activities funded with USAID/OFDA small grants to highlight lessons learned from their projects in order to inspire and inform future community-level DRR projects.

"We believe it is important to work with and support local NGOs dedicated to helping communities prepare for and mitigate the impacts of disasters," said USAID/OFDA Senior Regional Advisor Tim Callaghan. "Local organizations play a critical role in community capacity building, disaster risk identification, and response preparedness, and we are pleased to support these efforts."

Since 2011, the USAID/OFDA Regional Disaster Assistance Program (RDAP) has awarded 20 small grants, averaging \$30,000 each, to local NGOs to support community-level DRR projects in the Bahamas, Belize, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Saint Lucia, and Saint Kitts and Nevis.



Photo by Ana Silvia Fernández, USAID/OFDA

The RDAP Small Grant Program "is a cost-effective way to implement pilot projects that can later be adopted and replicated by governments, the private sector, or other organizations to contribute to successful community-level DRR," explained USAID/OFDA Regional Advisor Sidney Velado.

During the recent forum, 65 attendees and approximately 560 virtual participants who viewed the live streaming of the event had multiple occasions to discuss opportunities and limitations to implementing DRR in diverse contexts.

During his opening words, UNISDR Regional Coordinator Ricardo Mena emphasized the importance of working at the community level.

"Local governments and communities are the ones that know the reality of the situation and are the first to respond to adverse events. This forum is important because it includes those most involved in building resilience and sustainable development," Mena said.

Miguelina Acosta, President of Fundación Integral Niños Felices de América in the Dominican Republic, agreed.

"There are no small projects or big projects, only empowered communities that know what they want and fight for it," she said. The foundation's project in La Chapea was successful because implementers overcame resistance and transformed community members into allies by raising awareness of disaster risks and the importance of environmental restoration near the area's vast sugarcane plantations.

Carlos Flores, from SHARE Guatemala, which worked to provide emergency response equipment and first responder training to remote indigenous communities, stressed the need to involve the

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Photo courtesy of project implementers



Photo by Gabriela Albreuz, USAID/OFDA



Photo by Eduardo Gutiérrez, USAID/OFDA



Photo courtesy of project implementers

Through the small grants program, USAID/OFDA has funded DRR projects to make preschools safer, equip disaster response teams, mitigate drought impacts, and harvest rain water for emergency back-up. Top: Forum participants exchange ideas.

DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

USAID/OFDA Hosts Workshop To Review Seed Aid with Partners

USAID/OFDA recently hosted a workshop for NGO partners in the region to discuss disaster-related agricultural interventions and seed system security responses.

USAID/OFDA Agriculture and Food Security Technical Advisor Julie March and Louise Sperling, principal scientist-consultant for the International Center for Tropical Agriculture, facilitated the event, held on February 10 and 11 in San José, Costa Rica.

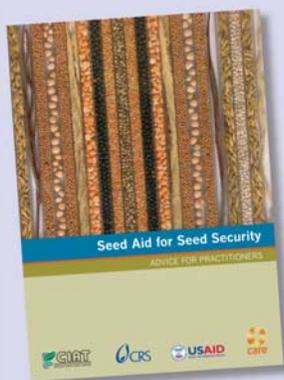
During the workshop, participants examined common wisdom on seed aid and seed systems; reviewed key advances in seed system security during the past 15 years; considered tools to conduct seed system security assessments; and discussed building blocks for successful seed system interventions.

Participants also discussed DRR solutions to disaster-related agricultural interventions, based on experiences from the field, such as projects to promote effective household-level seed storage and/or to support the local seed trade so that subsistence farmers can successfully sow their crops the next growing season after a disaster.

Seed systems expert Sperling noted that a global review of seed security system assessments – involving more than 10,000 observations – concluded that smallholder farmers obtain 51 percent of their seed from the local markets, and another 30 percent from their own stocks. Only a very small percentage of the seed sown in stress situations actually comes from humanitarian aid, which suggests that relief organizations should more closely evaluate whether seed distribution is appropriate or needed in the context of a given disaster response.

“Our disaster response actions should not undermine the farmer-led system of seed storage, transfer, and local market source use,” she said. “We need to catalyze and support all the seed systems farmers use – both informal and formal channels.”

This was the first time USAID/OFDA conducted a seed system security awareness-raising event in the Latin American and Caribbean region.



For additional information, contact USAID/OFDA Agriculture and Food Security Technical Advisor Julie March, at jmarch@usaid.gov, or consult seedsystem.org, a collaborative web site supported by diverse organizations, including USAID/OFDA, that contains assessment guides and practical advice briefs for seed-related assistance.

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DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

USAID/OFDA Strengthens Caribbean Damage Assessment Capabilities

USAID/OFDA supports activities to strengthen Caribbean countries' capabilities to conduct damage assessments and needs analyses following disasters.

During the past decade, through RDAP, USAID/OFDA has provided the Initial Damage Assessment (IDA) and the more in-depth Damage Assessment and Needs Analysis (DANA) courses to thousands of emergency responders in 11 Caribbean countries.

Most of these countries' national emergency management offices have adopted the USAID/OFDA courses and methodology, adjusting the content to address their specific needs. The goal of the training is to certify a strong base of local responders who are capable of quick and efficient deployment as required.

For example, following the December 2013 torrential rains that wreaked havoc on Dominica, Saint Lucia, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, all three affected countries used USAID/OFDA-trained local field staff and USAID/OFDA methodology to assess the humanitarian impacts of the disaster.

“When a disaster strikes, the first 48 hours are the most critical for saving lives. We must know what the humanitarian and logistical needs are before deploying supplies; our goal is to have trained individuals available on each island before an event occurs,” said Captain Stephen Russell, director of the Bahamas' National Emergency Management Agency, who spoke to participants at a USAID/OFDA-supported DANA course held in Nassau, Bahamas, in mid-February.

Many Caribbean emergency management systems, with assistance from USAID/OFDA, have also trained and certified local instructors to deliver the USAID/OFDA-developed courses.



Participants of the most recent DANA course, held in Nassau, Bahamas, show their certificates.

Photo courtesy of Krystal Hartman, USAID/OFDA

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community in DRR activities.

“We need to create a reaction through demand. If people are aware of the need for DRR, they will demand it from the authorities,” Flores said.

Universities, and the education sector in general, were repeatedly mentioned as important actors in disaster research, preparedness, and response efforts, as well as essential allies in community-level DRR projects.

Juan Bosco Bernal, from the Latin American and Caribbean University Network for Disaster Risk Reduction (REDULAC), discussed the importance of making schools and students resilient, which he defined as strength to face adversity.

During the environmental management panel, participants highlighted the importance of respecting natural resources to reduce risks. Water management was a recurrent theme, as participants discussed their efforts to mitigate drought in Brazil and prevent forest fires in Central America.

During the urban risk panel, Chilean architect Jaime Diaz, from the School of Architecture and Urban Planning of the University of Chile, noted that urban development can create risk because it changes the natural environment. USAID/OFDA Disaster Risk Management Specialist Manuel Santana added that “urban risk is not caused by the buildings themselves, but by other elements such as lack of urban planning and inadequate infrastructure.”

As part of its regional strategy to help reduce both rural and urban risks, USAID/OFDA plans to continue supporting community-level DRR projects throughout the region.