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The major goal of comprehensive disaster management is to strengthen capacity for mitigation, management, and response to all hazards. These hazards include all types of natural and man-made disasters such as floods earthquakes hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, chemical and industrial fires, and oil spills, and involves all sectors of society. Comprehensive Disaster Management (CDM) also encompasses all stages of disaster management, that is, mitigation, prevention, preparedness, response and recovery with the broad objectives being to minimize disaster risks and improve resilience.

Over its life, the Association of Caribbean States (ACS) has generally focused on the effects of natural disasters on it Member States. The emphasis has been on attempting to reduce the impact that natural events such as tropical cyclones and earthquakes have on the population, particularly on the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) that make up the Caribbean archipelago. These States, which fall directly into the general path of Atlantic cyclones, are considered to be the most vulnerable. In recent times the approach of the ACS has been towards disaster risk reduction, that is, the leg of the CDM which attempts to mitigate against the effects of any disaster event before the it happens, rather than focussing on recovery post-event.

Today, through the lens of disaster management, we will examine a phenomena which has affected most persons in the region, either through the impact it has had on our own personal lives or on the lives of others close to us; road traffic fatalities.

In June 2009, the World Health Organisation launched the global status report on road safety which reaffirmed that injuries due to road traffic crashes are a significant and major global health and development problem. Globally road crashes kill over 1.2 million people, and 30-50 million others are seriously injured or become disabled as a result of crashes. Road traffic injuries are the eighth leading cause of death globally and the leading cause of deaths to young people between the ages of 15 and 29. The current trends indicated that by 2030, road traffic deaths will be the fifth leading cause of deaths worldwide.

Developing countries find themselves to be in a very dire situation as more than 85% of these fatalities and 90% of the injuries occur in low to middle income countries. Poor countries find themselves over exposed as they account for 50 per cent of the world's road traffic, but almost 90 per cent of the traffic fatalities. To put these numbers in a regional perspective, in 2010, the Latin Caribbean region had an average per-capita traffic fatality rate of 22.2 per 100,000 persons, while the non-Latin Caribbean had a fatality rate of 14.4 per 100,000 persons. The Central America region had a fatality rate of 14.5 per 100,000 with road traffic injuries causing an estimated 142,000 deaths across the region of the Americas in 2012. Additionally, 20-50% of road traffic fatalities in the region are a result of alcohol related traffic crashes. Despite these startling numbers, most people are unaware that road traffic injuries are a leading cause of death and disability.

From a regional perspective, the significance of these numbers becomes even more apparent when they are compared to the fact that vehicle ownership in the region is very small. Worldwide, 27% of all road traffic deaths occur among pedestrians and cyclists, while in the Latin American and the Caribbean sub-region, deaths among these vulnerable groups account for more than 30% of fatalities and are expected to increase due to rising incomes and the attendant increase in motorisation.

Economic analysis of the effect of tropical cyclones on Caribbean economies indicate that a severe storm can depress country output by up to 1 per cent of gross domestic product in the year a hurricane hits, however a more startling impact is the annual economic burden of road crashes. Within the Latin American and Caribbean region the annual impact is estimated to be in the region of 1 to 3 per cent of gross national product, or approximately US18.9 billion, with these costs exceeding the value of development assistance received from external sources each year. It should be noted that these estimates represent the direct costs mainly due to lost productivity, rather than the full social cost of the crashes. Most crash victims are the primary source of household income and when killed or injured, their families are left without economic support. Additionally, survivors need immediate and long term care having become permanently disabled, becoming a burden on their families and on the society.

Some strategies that exist in the developed world have been proven to reduce road traffic injuries and a number of countries have successfully used these strategies to reduce their road traffic deaths. However, despite these advances there has been no overall worldwide reduction in the number of persons killed on the road annually. Consideration must be given to the fact that this plateau corresponds to a 15% increase in the number of vehicles registered. Unfortunately this increase is largely due to increased mobilisation in the developing world.

The prevailing question is how we reduce the spectre of road traffic fatalities that affects the region?

Global organisations have identified building a culture of risk reduction and prevention as a key tool in the toolbox to reduce the impact of death and injury due to road traffic crashes. Some of the simple solutions identified to reduce road crashes and their human and economic consequences include:

Providing adequate and stable financing for the implementation of road safety measures.

Implementing better road systems with particular regard to the vulnerable road users such as pedestrians and the elderly.

Increased public awareness of the major risk factors, such as, drunk driving and driving while tired.

The design and implementation of road safety policies at the national and community levels.

Better driver education.

Fortunately, the issue of road traffic fatalities has been raised on the regional platform and although the region has been plagued by paucity of data, there have been some advances in data collection and examination of issues. The relationship between alcohol and traffic crashes is being examined as part of the strategic action for the prevention and control of non-communicable diseases for countries of the Caribbean community 2011-2015.

The situation in the developed world is improving, largely due to a coordinated inter-sectorial approach to road safety. The projections indicate however that unless there is a strong political commitment to prevention and to risk reduction, crash death rates in low and middle income countries will double by the year 2020. It is recognized that a review of policies and programmes to improve the built environment and mass transportation, would significantly impact the health risks of road traffic accidents.

As seen from the numbers above there is a direct correlation between road safety improvement and poverty reduction. In conjunction with our global partners, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and the Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO), and with the support of the governments of the Greater Caribbean, the Association of Caribbean States intends to place road safety squarely on the regional agenda.

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