Only Together - Transforming Disaster Risk Management in the Greater Caribbean



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Disaster risk management is no foreign concept to the Greater Caribbean region. Every year, the hurricane season brings with it messages of preparedness over the radio, television and internet. Many countries across the region have implemented disaster risk management strategies, encompassing public education, construction activities, preparedness and response plans, establishment of contingency funds as seen in Jamaica and purchase of insurance products such as the Caribbean Catastrophe Risk Insurance Facility products.

There has also been progress in disaster response at the regional scale due to the leadership of organisations such the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA) and the Coordination Centre for Disaster Prevention in Central America and the Dominican Republic (CEPRENDEC). These advancements have been instrumental in the preservation of lives, livelihoods, health and economic assets in the face of disasters.

In spite of this progress, Latin America and the Caribbean continues to be one of the most disaster-prone regions in the world. Between 1997 and 2017, one out of every four disasters in the world occurred in Latin America and the Caribbean [1]. Furthermore, between 2000 and 2019, approximately 152 million people were affected by 1205 disasters in the region [2]. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in over 1.4 million deaths in the region [3] and it continues to impact every facet of society, all amidst a growing climate crisis which is expected to contribute US$1.4 billion to expected annual losses from hurricane wind damage alone in the region by the year 2050 [4].

The numbers are staggering and justifiably alarming. But how are they related to disaster risk management in the region? A short journey into the history of disaster risk management can shed some light on the issue.

Prior to the mid-20th century, disasters arising from the impacts of hurricane, earthquakes and

other natural hazards were associated with misfortune. Nature was seen as an angry, unrelenting force, which could not be controlled. As such, loss of lives and livelihoods was considered inevitable. However, advancements in science and technology in the second half of the 20th century ushered in a new era of disaster management and by the 1990s there was greater emphasis on managing disaster risk.

While, the fatalistic view of disasters no longer dominates the Greater Caribbean, to a large extent they are still perceived as “natural” events. As such, they are managed as external occurrences which disrupt day-to-day living, and emphasis is placed on disaster response, resulting in a cyclic pattern of; disaster > response > recovery > repeat. The treatment of disasters as exogenous events has also resulted in the compartmentalisation of disaster risk management. In many countries of the region, the responsibilities of disaster risk management lie within specialised national entities and natural hazards are manged in silos.

However, experience has taught us that disasters are not natural and they cannot be compartmentalised. The COVID-19 pandemic is a painful example of this. COVID-19 viral infections evolved into a disaster because of the presence of exposed human populations. Had the world been better equipped to contain the virus, COVID-19 would not have escalated into a disaster of this scale. Furthermore, the pandemic has disrupted global systems and it requires international, regional, national, local and even household cooperation in order to be effectively managed. Insight into what makes certain persons more vulnerable to infection and death and the counteracting measures which are required is critically important to safeguarding lives.

Similarly, earthquakes and other natural hazards result in disaster when they impact vulnerable and exposed human populations. Disasters can have extensive impacts on societies and recovery can span months, years and decades, as seen in the case of Haiti and many other countries of the region. Effective management of disaster risk in the region requires a deeper understanding of the underlying drivers of risk. Some of these drivers include but are not limited to, urban planning or a lack thereof, fragile economic systems, social inequality, poverty, corruption, environmental degradation, poor law enforcement and a lack of cross-sectoral collaboration.

The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the greatest challenges of the 21st century, but it is also one of the greatest opportunities. It has forced us to take a microscopic look at the susceptibility of our health, national security and economic systems and has elucidated the importance of anticipatory risk management. It has forced us to cooperate at international, national, regional, local and household scales and across all sectors of society. Very importantly, it has highlighted the importance of a comprehensive approach to disaster risk management.

A comprehensive approach to disaster risk management considers the systematic nature of disaster risk and seeks to address it at its root. It highlights the interrelated nature of hazards and their cascading impacts and facilitates the integration of risk management strategies. For example, the management of disaster risk associated with hurricanes should also include flood, landslide and disease management. Furthermore, disaster risk reduction and climate change adaption strategies should be integrated to maximise scarce resources and enhance technical capacities to manage climate-configured disasters.

This transformation in disaster risk management cannot be achieved without cooperation. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us that no one is safe until we are all safe. Greater collaboration among inter-governmental organisations, regional governments, the scientific community, businesses and communities is required to understand complex risk patterns and make risk-informed decisions.

The Association of Caribbean States (ACS) is committed to transforming the disaster risk management landscape in the region through multilateral cooperation and strategic action. Over the next triennium, the ACS will work towards enhancing disaster risk assessment, augmenting adaptive capacities and improving multi-hazard early warning service delivery in the region. We look forward to strengthening and increasing multilateral partnerships, as we work towards building a stronger region.

Let's match rhetoric with meaningful action in the Greater Caribbean region. This we can only achieve, together.

[1] Regional Assessment Report on Disaster Risk in Latin America and the Caribbean| Publications (undrr.org)

[2] Natural Disasters in Latin America and the Caribbean| Publications (unocha.org)

[3] PAHO and ECLAC discuss health, social and economic impact of COVID-19| News (paho.org)

[4] Global Assesment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction, 2015| Publications (undrr.org)

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