The ACS and Disaster Risk Reduction in the Greater Caribbean



The Member States of the Association of Caribbean States, which include both island economies and countries bordering the Caribbean Sea, are considered highly vulnerable to disasters. Caribbean Island States suffer risk from hydro-climatic events, such as tropical cyclones and flooding resulting from the heavy downpour. The modality of risk of damage occurring in countries on the Central and South American landmass is similar, but with a greater risk of landslides. This risk is aggravated by the combination of effects of the region lying on active tectonic plates, several active volcanoes, relatively short distances between mountain and coast, and the development of infrastructure in vulnerable and hazardous areas, giving the wider region a very high risk profile.

The statistics on disasters within the Greater Caribbean over the last twenty years tell a grim tale; it is estimated that during this period over 30% of the 240 million people who call the Latin American and Caribbean region home, have been affected by disasters. Between 1980 and 2010, disasters in the region have led to the loss of thousands of lives, while directly affecting millions of people and crippling the economies of countries, as losses from disasters are estimated to be in the region of 16% of regional GDP.

Hurricane Mitch, which in 1998 struck the countries of Central America wiped out more than 30 per cent of the assets of the poorest quarter of the population of Honduras, and killed 2000 persons in a single village in Nicaragua. The other Central American nations, Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Panama, were also affected by the hurricane, although the death toll in these locations were significantly lower than in Honduras and Nicaragua. The hurricane eventually killed 11,000 persons across the region and left almost as many reported missing. The value of the damage caused, the majority of it occurring largely between Nicaragua and Honduras, totalled over US$ 5 billion. Jamaica has fared no better with natural disasters costing the country more than US$1 billion in direct costs over the last 20 years. Cuba has similarly suffered, with Hurricane Gustav causing losses of between US$ 3 to 4 billion to the Cuban economy, and the loss of more than 320,000 homes, and the destruction of more than half of the annual crop of sugar cane, the country's primary export crop.

Direct losses due to tropical cyclones in the 2010 Atlantic hurricane season across the region exceeded US$2 billion, while the earthquake which struck Haiti in the same year, resulted in US$

2.3 billion in damages and the loss of over 200,000 lives in the already impoverished country. It is estimated that the cost of recovery from the earthquake and the tropical storms which also hit will exceed US$ 14 billion in Haiti alone.

Significant disaster risk is also evident within the larger economies within the region with Colombia considered as one of the most vulnerable countries to natural disaster in Latin America, with over eight out of ten persons located in high risk areas and more than 85% of the country's GDP considered to be at risk from disaster events. Mexico and Venezuela have not been spared with Mexico experiencing over 90 earthquakes per year with a magnitude of 4.0 or more on the Richter Magnitude Scale, and Venezuela suffering loss of life of approximately 997 people per year and an annual economic damage of over US$1 billion.

It is against this backdrop, with the region's history of catastrophes and giving consideration to the vulnerability of the Member States and the costs associated with recovery, that disaster risk recovery becomes a critical issue to the work of the Association of Caribbean States.

In April 1999 during the 2nd Summit of Heads of States and Government of ACS, all ACS Member States signed an Agreement for Regional Cooperation in the area of Natural Disasters. The objective of the agreement, which is to be binding on all Member States, is to promote co-operation for prevention, mitigation and management of natural disasters, through the collaboration of the Members among themselves and with organizations which work in the field of natural disasters in the region. ACS Member States also agreed to incorporate disaster risk reduction plans into national development policies.

It was acknowledged that many countries in the region are small and have insufficient resources to carry out disaster relief and disaster mitigation activities on an individual basis, and accordingly, emphasis was especially placed on working jointly with relevant sub-regional specialized agencies such as CDERA (Caribbean Disasters Emergency Response Agency) now the CDEMA(Caribbean Disaster Management Agency), the Coordination Centre for Natural Disaster Prevention in Central America (CEPREDENAC), the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and national agencies with more experience.

A global shift in focus from responding to disasters to one of preparedness before an event saw the change of the name of the special committee from the Special Committee on Natural Disasters to the Special Committee on Disaster Risk Reduction. This change was not cosmetic but reflected the tenets of comprehensive disaster management and placed the focus of the Association on mitigating the effects of disasters of all forms by reducing the risk before the event. The Association's work program is also guided by the five priorities of the Hyogo Framework for Action. These five priority areas are:

1. Ensure that disaster risk reduction is a national and a local priority with a strong institutional basis for implementation.

2. Identify, assess and monitor disaster risks and enhance early warning.

3. Use knowledge, innovation and education to build a culture of safety and resilience at all levels.

4. Reduce the underlying risk factors.

5. Strengthen disaster preparedness for effective response at all levels.

From its initial establishment as the Special Committee on Natural Disasters through its change of

name to the Special Committee of Disaster Risk Reduction, the ACS has initiated several projects across the region in this focal area. These projects are directly aligned with the Hyogo Framework and include projects which have sought to develop a culture of disaster prevention and awareness among the population, improve the technical capacity of the meteorological agencies in the region and train public sector officials in disaster response mechanisms.

The ACS, through the work of the Special Committee of Disaster Risk Reduction, is currently developing other projects, which are considered important to our regional mechanisms of disaster response. Two of these key projects are:

International Disaster Recovery Law, which seeks to establish a legal framework for how countries in the region interact with each other and international relief agencies, to allow access to the affected country and rapid provision of disaster relief to persons affected and

Green Response to Disasters, which recognises that recovery efforts go on long after the event has passed, and must be done in a manner that recognises sustainability and vulnerability of the environment.

The work of the Directorate of Disaster Risk Reduction continues with the next meeting of the Special Committee for Disaster Risk Reduction of the Association of Caribbean States to be held on October 2nd, 2013, in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.