French Overseas Departments, cooperation and the process of major hazard prevention in the Caribbean

The heterogeneity of territories is the major characteristic of the Caribbean region with various legal and political structures, cultural and linguistic differences (Dutch, English, French and Spanish), disparate socio-economic development as measured by the Human Development Index (HDI) ranging from 0.471 for Haiti to 0.850 and 0.858 for Guadeloupe and Martinique respectively. However, whether independent Small Island Developing States (SIDS) or non-independent territories of European nations (French and Dutch), the regional territories share many problems, particularly in terms of vulnerability to natural hazards and poor connectivity.

Despite similar vulnerabilities, converging priorities and the efforts of the various regional parties, cooperation between non-EU Caribbean territories and the French regions of the area, remains below its potential. These actions have been struggling to lead to the creation of common practices which may contribute to the effective integration of French Departments of America (DFA). One explanation for this struggle lies in a lack of mutual knowledge and difficulty in identifying the actors and initiatives at different levels of the French public sector, especially in the prevention and management of natural hazards. This article will succinctly present some of the predominant actors and tools of the French approach to the prevention of major risks, before discussing some projects supported under the European inter-regional (INTERREG) program.

The French public management structures for major natural hazards cover different levels of decision and intervention. Thus the prevention of major risks is an activity that involves several ministries, local authorities, and various government agencies. The Ministries of Sustainable Development, Agriculture, Education, and Research intervene under the areas of safety information, monitoring, public education, risk mitigation and management, while the Ministry of the Interior handles preparation and crisis management. Under these components, and within the territorial levels corresponding to each DFA, the two main actors in the disaster response arena are the County

Prefects with responsibility for local implementation of state policies and the Mayors of each of the 32, 34 and 22 municipalities in Guadeloupe, Martinique and French Guiana respectively.

Each County Prefect establishes a Departmental File for Hazards Risks, which informs the cities about the existing risks and their consequences for people, property and the environment and also lists the specific plan for the prevention of foreseeable hazards as well as for intervention for industries. The County Prefect is also responsible for a civil defence response which determines the general organisation of any rescue effort and identifies all public and private bodies capable of being deployed given the hazards that exist in each provincial department. An inter-service defence and civil protection team responsible for assisting in the management of risk and crisis throughout all three phases (prevention, operational and post-crisis) supports the actions of the County Prefect in conjunction with the armed forces, local authorities, and other agencies.

At the local level, the mayor, responsible for urban planning and security, informs the population about disaster risks and organises emergency first aid actions in case of a crisis. To this end, he establishes tools such as the City Information File about hazard risks plans for the prevention of foreseeable environmental hazards, and a local disaster plan, which lists the local resources available to the city in case of a major event such as rescue services and charitable organisations.

Alongside these actors charged with the power to police, local authorities have a crucial role in the management of resources deployed for disaster prevention. For example, in Martinique, as part of the Caribbean Earthquake Plan (CEP) developed by France, both the Regional Council and the General Council contribute to the resilience of schools in the occurrence of a major geological hazard. The recently approved General Council plan for the seismic strengthening of buildings has resulted in the retrofitting of those colleges most damaged by the 2007 earthquake. Additionally, by establishing investment policies and providing financing for the equipping of selected classrooms with locally developed para-seismic desks, these local authorities make the CEP a tool for both mitigation and economic recovery.

The competence, experience and expertise of the various French actors at all levels of intervention allow for consideration of various forms of sharing and support to neighbouring countries. Regional cooperation instruments, such as the Regional Cooperation Fund or the INTERREG Operational Programmes (OP) for the Amazonia (Brazil, Suriname, and Guyana) and the Caribbean, are aimed at strengthening cooperation and exchange of experiences through joint initiatives at the appropriate territorial levels.

The 2007/2013 INTERREG Caribbean OP identifies the prevention of natural hazards as a priority by supporting actions in hazard identification, risk management and planning, preparation, prevention, public information and education, Of these last two components, several entities within the French territories were supported in their preparation for natural disasters; whether through improvement and harmonization of response protocols or through training of persons in vulnerable and isolated communities to act as local intervention teams.

Monitoring is another major component of INTERREG support through the initiatives such as TSUNAHOULE and TSUAREG. The former involves the numerical modelling of Caribbean marine

natural hazards, and the latter provides for the acquisition and installation of equipment to provide information on earthquakes and tsunamis from scientific organizations to local authorities. Finally, the CARIB RISK CLUSTER project establishes a solid foundation for technical cooperation based on feedback about best practices and solutions.

One of the projects the ACS is currently pursuing in conjunction with the DFAs, is the establishment of a certified diploma in disaster management and risk prevention, recognised both in the European Union and the Caribbean. This will serve to improve the skill set of regional disaster management professionals while allowing for the sharing of best practices from distinct viewpoints.

Following the 19th Meeting of the Ministerial Council of the ACS, cooperation between the French overseas territories and the rest of the Caribbean has now entered a new era, with approval for the territories of Martinique and Guadeloupe to become Associate Members in their own right. Notwithstanding this change, France will continue to function as an Associate Member representing the interests of St. Martin, French Guiana and St. Bartholomew.

As part of the regional cooperation agenda, the ACS aims to further build bridges with the French territories that take full advantage of the great potential for collaboration in the area of disaster risk reduction.