Yokohama and Hyogo: A Springboard for Caribbean Action in Disaster Risk Reduction

The last two decades have seen intense global actions towards increasing the profile of disaster risk reductions in development planning and practice. Following the actions initiated by the United Nations in its International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (1990-2000), two world conferences have taken place; in Yokohama (1994) and in Kobe (2005), both of which have provided a unique opportunity to promote systematic and strategic approaches at the national level to address vulnerability and reduce the risk to natural hazards. Outputs from these conferences, the Yokohama strategy and the Hyogo framework for Action 2005-2015, were adopted by the global community and have influenced disaster risk management measures within the Caribbean region.

The Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action for a Safer World, adopted at the World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction held in Yokohama, Japan (May 1994), not only highlighted an economic perspective of natural disaster mitigation, but a social one as well. It thus called for lines of actions on all levels: community, national, regional, sub-regional, and international. Its main focus was on the promotion of education, training and coordination related to disaster risk reduction. The adoption of the Yokohama Strategy also coincided with the ratification of the Barbados Programme of Action at the Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States in 1994 – a programme of action that underscored the vulnerability of these countries to natural phenomena in economic and social terms. Consequently, it was through these two conferences that global attention was drawn to the Small Island Developing States of the Caribbean and to the development of their disaster risk reduction measures.

A major project that evolved out of the Yokohama Strategy was the 1997 Caribbean Disaster Mitigation Project led by the Organisation of the American States (OAS) and USAID. This project was focused on the regional development of long-term and cost-effective natural disaster preparedness, response, recovery, mitigation and monitoring in light of significant economic industries, such as tourism and agriculture. Moreover, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) developed a regional disaster emergency network throughout the nations of Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Bahamas, Haiti, St. Lucia and Trinidad and Tobago, while efforts were consolidated to implement the Caribbean Uniform Building Code (CUBC) to improve building structure safety. The Caribbean Development Bank also mainstreamed disaster reduction and

management into its financial policies in 2000. Additionally, several conferences were held within the Caribbean to provide training to local officials in appropriate risk reduction measures. The World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) in collaboration with the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) held a Workshop on Meteorological and Hydrological Data for the Insurance Industry in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, in October 1995, to address the urgent need for insurance availability and livelihood protection; the WMO also organised an Expert Meeting on Public Weather Services and Hurricane Disaster Preparedness in Trinidad in December later that year in order to improve hurricane forecasting systems. However, a decade after its implementation, the Yokohama Strategy proved to be lacking in certain key aspects of disaster risk reduction, and thus, the Hyogo Framework for Action was created.

The Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015 was adopted at the World Conference on Disaster Reduction held in Kobe, Hyogo (Japan) in 2005. According to this framework, the Yokohama Strategy, which was centred on the coordination of international and regional efforts to develop disaster risk management, fell behind in the areas of national policy frameworks, risk and knowledge management, national preparedness plans, and addressing as well as reducing the causes of natural disasters. The Hyogo Framework which is still currently in implementation today, aims to continue implementing the Yokohama guidelines in addition to promoting disaster risk reduction at a country's local level. It focuses on producing and enforcing sustainable development and climate change legislation and policies, engaging the participation of political bodies, performing multi-risk assessments, promoting knowledge exchange, stimulating technical innovation, fostering public awareness of natural disasters and related issues, as well as providing a gender perspective on the matter.

In the Caribbean context, the Hyogo Framework for Action has fuelled numerous disaster management projects across the region. The Caribbean Risk Management Initiative, launched in 2004 with the support of United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), has elaborated 'tools for enhancing gender visibility in disaster risk management and climate change' and has created an online regional library to share information with the public. Similarly, the ECLAC Sub-regional Headquarters for the Caribbean carries out a Gender Impact Assessment following the occurrence of natural disasters. Additionally, the Caribbean Community Climate Change Centre (CCCCC), established in August 2005, is geared towards regional adaptation to climate change through a series of projects, while the UWI - Disaster Risk Reduction Centre, based in Jamaica, works alongside the CDEMA to produce research and provide training related to disaster risk management.

With regard to the promotion of public awareness as noted in the Hyogo Framework, a uniform level of public education on disaster risk reduction does not appear to be present across the region. On the surface, it appears that those Caribbean countries that are most affected by natural hazards such as hurricanes, have robust public awareness campaigns, unlike other less vulnerable countries. According to the Hyogo Framework for Action Mid-term Review, there are only a few countries, including Cuba and Jamaica, which have very strong public awareness structures in place, such as regular national simulation exercises and substantial media coverage on disaster preparedness.

Notwithstanding the gaps exposed in the mid-term review, both strategies however have positively influenced disaster risk reduction in the Caribbean, albeit in different ways. In the first case, the Yokohama Strategy has placed Small Island Developing States at the forefront of international sustainable development and disaster management. Accordingly in the latter half of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, the global audience saw an increase in collaborative efforts among international organisations, foreign governments and Caribbean countries to develop regional disaster management mechanisms. In the second case, the Hyogo Framework for Action has extended the collaborative efforts but has also added new dimensions in

assessing the impact of natural hazards by introducing a gender perspective and acknowledgment of the impact of climate change in these processes. The Framework has also sought to rally support and development at a national level within the region through political and public capacity building.

In the face of the increasing occurrence and intensity of natural hazards, particularly over the last decade, and the imminent deadline in 2015 for achieving the UN Millennium Development Goals, the direction of international dialogue has changed. There is now a global recognition that there was insufficient emphasis that disaster risk and resilience received in the original Millennium Development Goals, despite the clear relationship between disasters and development. Along with the impact of climate change, the main identified drivers of risk are poorly planned and managed urbanization, environmental degradation, poverty and weak governance, highlighting the linkages between sustainable development and disaster risk reduction. Given the growing disaster risk levels, reducing them should be part of the post-2015 development agenda in order to meet international development objectives.

While significant advances have been made in the region, it is understood that the Caribbean still remains one of the most vulnerable places on the planet. Despite the uncertainties which surround the large international consultative processes, and the political difficulties in achieving some of the targets, the region is well poised on the eve of 2015 to make significant strides towards reducing its vulnerability to natural hazards and enhancing its sustainable development goals.

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