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DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

Institutions of Higher Education Embrace DRR in the LAC Region

Higher education institutions and the scientific community play a vital role in supporting and strengthening the disaster preparedness, response, and recovery potential of Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) countries, particularly in relation to climate change as a growing global priority. An effort to reinforce this important alliance, USAID/OFDA and the U.N. International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) recently sponsored the Second Latin American Regional Forum on Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) in Higher Education. The forum, organized by the Latin American and Caribbean University Network for DRR (REDULAC), took place in Bogotá, Colombia, November 24 to 26.

Approximately 180 participants—university professors, academics, scientific researchers, and disaster management experts—representing over 120 universities and emergency response organizations from 17 LAC countries and the United States gave lectures and participated in a series of daily discussion panels on specific themes related to partnering university institutions with local and national governments and disaster management agencies to research risk solutions, adaptation strategies, and mitigate the effects of climate change and future disasters.

Panel discussions included themes such as: building private and public partnerships for the integrated assessment and management of extreme events; the role of higher education institutions and the scientific community in relation to municipal governments and the issues of DRR and climate change; the role of universities in preparing hospitals for patient care in large disasters; multidisciplinary scientific and academic research on DRR policy and strategy management at the local, national, and global levels; and numerous additional themes.

“Every day, institutions of higher education generate greater consciousness regarding their duty and responsibility to engage in disaster risk reduction in the region. REDULAC was the vehicle and determining factor responsible for instigating this change in institutional consciousness,” noted REDULAC’s Executive Regional Secretary Dr. Luis Carlos Martínez Medina.

In addition, dozens of universities and emergency response agencies participated in the forum’s live broadcast via Internet. The three-day simulcast received an unprecedented 20,339 visitors from



Photo courtesy of REDULAC

Participants from over 120 universities and organizations attended the Second Latin American Regional Forum on DRR in Bogotá, Colombia.

20 countries. A designated team of USAID/OFDA disaster management experts and the Colombian School of Military Engineers’ Masters Department for Risk Management and Development representatives responded to questions and comments from the virtual audience, creating a bridge of information sharing between the thousands of viewers online and the forum’s assembly of professionals in Bogotá.

The forum gave momentum to the numerous advancements in DRR spearheaded by the first LAC regional REDULAC forum held in Panama City, Panama, in 2012. Similar to its predecessor, the three-day event included presentations by DRR experts and university professors who shared research experiences and lessons learned. They discussed incorporating DRR themes into their research and curricula; including careers in DRR, social action, educational outreach, and community engagement in disaster risk management

and reduction. Discussions on climate change shared center stage with DRR themes, adding greater importance to the timeliness and rapid implementation of risk reduction policies and procedures in the LAC region.

Part of the forum coordination team, USAID/OFDA Technical Manager Fabian Arellano commented on the events many achieve-

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Photo courtesy of REDULAC

Attendees to the conference were joined by more than 20,000 online participants from 20 countries.

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Photo by Francisco Linares, USAID/OFDA

Ash column rises from Chaparrastique Volcano in December 2013. San Miguel, El Salvador.

VDAP Provides Assistance for Volcanoes in LAC

The Volcano Disaster Assistance Program (VDAP), implemented by U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) and funded by USAID/OFDA, provided assistance for 27 volcanic events around the world in the past year. The program benefited over 1.3 million people, who live within a 10-kilometer radius of a volcano, with 19 remote and eight on-site responses.

Fiscal Year (FY) 2014, which ended on September 30, was an active one for VDAP in the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region. VDAP worked at 16 volcanoes in seven countries, including Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Peru, which all required either on-site or remote VDAP support. A total of 340,287 people in LAC benefited from VDAP intervention, through community consciousness and response.

Responses included: crisis responses in Ecuador, Guatemala, and Peru, as well as remote responses in Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Ecuador, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Peru. In most cases, the response is limited to support and monitoring from the VDAP, in collaboration with local authorities.

For example, in El Salvador, Chaparrastique Volcano—also known as San Miguel Volcano—has remained active since late December 2013. On July 10, seismicity increased dramatically, and the General Civil Protection Directorate of El Salvador put the volcano and nearby communities on “orange alert” to activate departmental Civil Protection commissions, due to the high probability of eruptive activity. The following weekend, a small explosion in the upper area of the cone produced a small plume 200 meters high. The increase in seismicity was not particularly dramatic, and VDAP members are keeping permanent watch on the situation. As of today, the Government of El Salvador has not requested assistance.

Aside from the mentioned responses, VDAP also supported local organizations with infrastructure, technical assistance, training, and planning. According to the report, their technical assistance “led counterparts to modify 11 geological policies or procedures to increase the preparedness for volcanic eruptions”. Through 26 trainings, the program helped 188 participants learn about volcano monitoring and eruption mitigation techniques.

In the LAC region, VDAP contributed in the National Seismology, Volcanology, Meteorology and Hydrology Institute (INSIVUMEH) adoption of cellular technology to remotely access seismic data from volcanoes in Guatemala. Also, Costa Rica’s Volcanological and Seismological Observatory (OVSICORI) and Colombia’s Geological Service (SGC) were trained in the use and adopted the (USGS) web-based volcanic ash cloud modeling software for their analysis of hazards.

VDAP also provided training and technical assistance events in LAC, like seismology workshops in Arequipa and Trujillo, Peru; volcanology training in Chile and Argentina; gas monitoring training in Costa Rica; deformation training for Cerro Negro and Chiles in Colombia; and seismic data display and interpretation for volcano observers on Santiaguito and Fuego, Guatemala.

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Haiti Launches ICS Training Program

The Government of Haiti Department of Civil Protection (DPC) launched a new training program on the Incident Command System (ICS) approach. DPC will implement the multi-year program with technical support from the U.S. Forest Service and funding from USAID/OFDA.

The ICS management system improves emergency response by integrating personnel, policies, procedures, facilities, and equipment into a common organizational structure and process. “It is important because it will increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the government’s emergency response capacity” says USAID/OFDA Program Officer Angelica Fleischer. DPC held briefings on December 2 and 3, 2014, with representatives from key ministries and government institutions involved in emergency response. Other partners, such as UNDP, the World Bank, OCHA, ECHO, the Haitian Red Cross, and several international NGOs, also participated in the briefings.

These briefings provided a summary of the ICS approach and an overview of the training program. Participants provided several useful suggestions, DPC will integrate into the design of the program. A consultative workshop will be held in the first quarter of 2015 to adapt the ICS approach to the Haitian context and emergency response system.



Photo by Bathalie Guerrier, USAID/OFDA

(l-r): Alta Jean-Baptiste, Director of DPC; Patrick Henry Bastien, Deputy Director General of the Ministry of Interior and Local Authorities; Kevin Misenheimer, Emergency Management Specialist with the U.S. Forest Service.

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ments, “The investment made on behalf of the USAID/OFDA/LAC Regional Disaster Assistance Program offered numerous institutions, professors, students, staff, and decision makers the vehicle and opportunity to promote DRR initiatives within their professions, in addition to the implementation of DRR policies and procedures within the greater community.”

USAID/OFDA, UNISDR, and REDULAC forum organizers are currently collaborating on a technical document detailing the event’s presentations, thematic panels, and discussion sessions, as well as the many conclusions and commitments-to-action taken by individual universities and agency participants. These conclusions and forum declaration will be presented at the upcoming Hyogo Framework for Action 2005–2015, in Sendai, Japan, in early 2015.

Results from the 2012 and 2014 Latin American Regional Forums on DRR in Higher Education, along with the virtual forum broadcast, links to universities and other organizations in the network, and information about future DRR and climate change adaptation-related events can be found on the REDULAC web site: www.redulac.net.

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