



Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA)
Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean, San José, Costa Rica

DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

LAC Region Shares ICS Experiences

Musical notes are one of the few “languages” common to the entire world. You can read a score in China or Costa Rica, and the notes played are always the same.

In the disaster management world, the notes are the same in any country, but the instrument used to play vary significantly from region to region, country to country, city to city, and institution to institution.

One of the recurring themes in a recent forum was the need for all players in the orchestra of disaster management and response to use the same language to create a nice harmony and agreeable music.

The Third Latin American Incident Command System Application Experiences Forum, held February 4 to 6, 2015, in Salinitas, El Salvador, was an opportunity for members of different stakeholder organizations from countries throughout the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region to come together and discuss their experiences applying the Incident Command System (ICS), which several participants at the forum emphasized as the common way for disaster relief professionals to communicate when working together.

The structure of the forum included plenary conferences, thematic panels, Q&A sessions, and working groups, all aimed to generate a discussion on experiences with the implementation and application of ICS in Latin America, as a way to strengthen the



Photo by Luis Rodriguez, Ministry of the Interior and Land Development of El Salvador

Participants from 12 countries met in Salinitas, El Salvador, to discuss the progress and future of ICS implementation in the LAC region.

strategic links that contribute to the sustainability of the implementation process in each country.

Participants from 12 countries included members of government and non-governmental organizations, first response institutions, the private and public sector, the health sector, and the education sector. Attendees shared their own and learned about others’ positive experiences and challenges faced when applying ICS in their areas.

Many representatives noted that additional steps still needed to be taken to institutionalize the ICS system. “This event serves as a mechanism to learn about and exchange experiences about ICS implementation. It also raises awareness within the political level, among decision-makers, to understand the importance of ICS implementation as a national and regional mechanism, so they commit to its promotion and application,” explained Armando Vividor, Chief of Operations for the General Civil Protection Directorate of El Salvador.

One of the objectives of the forum was to identify the progress made in the region regarding ICS, but also a way to identify where the process is going and find new opportunities for growth. “Right now, the Caribbean does not have a solid ICS process or experiences, and we need to change that. Working with the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency, planning and executing a Caribbean Forum, having pilot projects, and developing instructors, the Caribbean could develop an interesting process

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Photo by Luis Rodriguez, Ministry of the Interior and Land Development of El Salvador

Tim Callaghan, USAID/OFDA Senior Regional Advisor, and Ramon Aristides Valencia, Minister of the Interior and Land Development of El Salvador, address the participants of the Third Latin American ICS Application Experiences Forum, in El Salvador.

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Photo by Beryl Armbrister, USAID/OFDA

Dr. Robert K. Lewis, Minister of Education, signs the MoU between USAID/OFDA and the Ministry of Education of Saint Lucia to support School Safety and DRR Education in the country.

MoU Signing with Saint Lucia

In January, USAID/OFDA and the Government of Saint Lucia (GoSL), through the Ministry of Education, signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) that permits USAID/OFDA to provide important resources, tools, and technical assistance to support Saint Lucia in reducing risks from natural disasters and increasing emergency response capabilities.

USAID/OFDA's School Safety Program will deliver DRR techniques and education to the communities, provide technical assistance to the GoSL, and help Saint Lucia to develop and implement plans and policies that will improve emergency preparedness and reduce disaster risks.

During the signing ceremony, USAID/OFDA/LAC Senior Regional Advisor, Tim Callaghan mentioned, "It is in educational institutions where we can unite many families and communities for a common goal. Spreading a message of preparation within schools and universities can play a big role in getting communities ready for any situation they may face. And this will, in turn, prevent suffering and loss of lives."

Through this partnership, Saint Lucia will strengthen its capacity to prepare for disasters and to respond strategically at the community-level. Under the USAID/OFDA School Safety Program, schools, parents, and community members will collaborate to establish effective emergency management plans.

These plans will ensure a safe learning environment for children and teachers on a daily basis, as well as in the event of a disaster. Through training sessions and drills, school staff and students will learn the necessary steps to reduce disaster risks and respond to disasters.

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Building DRR Capacity in the Caribbean

USAID/OFDA/LAC presented the Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) course in January to a handpicked group of 12 people from various countries in the Caribbean and Belize. The course is designed to promote DRR within the region and aims to build capacity and understanding through its participants.

According to USAID/OFDA/LAC DRR Specialist Eduardo Gutiérrez, "The course is critical to building capacity in the region. It is an efficient way to educate countries to the systematic DRR process of risk assessment and reduction."

"The course provided me with additional tools for analyzing disaster risk capacities that I have already begun to implement in my work with community organizations in Jamaica," said participant Joanna Ogilvie.

Until recently, most countries in the region had been focused on preparing for disaster response. Given that most countries have very limited resources, risk reduction was not considered an option because it was thought to be too expensive. USAID/OFDA/LAC is using this course to change this perception.

"We want countries to look at DRR as a way to save money. As each dollar invested in DRR, typically over time, will return seven dollars in savings," Gutiérrez continued. It is critical for countries with limited resources to prioritize DRR as the most cost-effective way to diminish risks.

Participants of the course returned home with all of the tools necessary to work with institutions or governments to implement the DRR protocol for analyzing disaster risks and planning solutions for mitigating those risks. Students are already planning on offering the course in school shelter and safety programs, as well as to national disaster organizations and private institutions.



Photo by Clive Lorde, USAID/OFDA

Instructors and participants of the DRR course in Miami.

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that recognizes the cultural and institutional differences in the region," concluded USAID/OFDA Disaster Risk Management Specialist for Barbados, Clive Lorde.

Every day, emergencies require more professionals, as well as inter-disciplinary and inter-institutional management in national disaster risk management systems, to ensure that their service is timely, effective, and efficient. For this reason, USAID/OFDA/LAC has promoted capacity building through the implementation of ICS, by developing protocols, procedures, and other technical assistance processes.

USAID/OFDA/LAC is pleased to support the application of the ICS process in different countries in the region, and will continue to work with these countries to expand their capacities in order to improve responses and help organizations. This event was an important bridge to foster communication between organizations and countries, and learn that despite differences, the goals are the same. By learning from each other and harmoniously working together, the goals are within reach.