

## Integrating protection into disaster risk preparedness in the Dominican Republic

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**Addressing protection as a key element of community-based disaster risk reduction and preparedness efforts is essential to safeguarding human rights in disaster and emergency settings.**

Since the early 2000s, the protection sector has made great strides in identifying and responding to risks affecting local populations during emergencies, whether in conflict situations or disaster response. While a vast wealth of knowledge, experiences and literature has been generated over recent years around protection in these contexts, less attention has been given to thinking about protection through the lens of disaster risk preparedness. That is, in disaster settings, protection measures and activities are normally implemented during the response phase but are not as often meaningfully considered as an integral part of disaster risk reduction and prevention efforts.

In many countries, during or immediately after a disaster, state response actors are frequently unable to reach affected populations for significant periods of time, or may lack the capacity or resources to assist the population to the full extent needed. As a result, during any given disaster it is communities themselves, and not necessarily state duty-bearers, who are most likely to be the first responders. In this sense, communities play a crucial role in their own safekeeping and, with the right tools, can be effectively involved in implementing protection measures to prevent and/or respond to situations of harm or abuse that often take place in emergency settings. It is within this context that a consortium<sup>1</sup> of organisations comprising Oxfam, Plan International and Habitat for Humanity has sought to work at the community level in the Dominican Republic with riverside urban poor communities – *barrios* – that are at high risk of disaster-induced displacement.

On a periodic basis, the Dominican Republic suffers major climate-related events

that, when combined with the underlying conditions of extreme inequality and widespread impoverishment, result all too often in disaster. Among the most significant recent examples are Hurricane George in 1998, which left over 85,000 internally displaced and 350 dead; the Jimaní flash flooding in 2004, which erased several communities from the map and left over 600 dead and around 1,000 families displaced; and, in 2007, tropical



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storms Noel and Olga which left over 160 dead and 140,000 people internally displaced.

With little or no government follow-up, and rendered almost completely invisible by the absence of a national register or census, thousands of families displaced by these events continue to live today in the 'temporary refuges' they were originally relocated to by the government, still waiting after years, if not decades, to be resettled or sent back to their places of origin. In reality, these 'refuges' are no more than improvised shacks made out of tin, cardboard, mud or canvas, often located in high-risk zones with no access to basic services and in crowded and deplorable conditions.

During and after emergencies, however, affected communities are also routinely exposed to additional and severe protection risks. For example, many Dominicans living

in high-risk zones refuse to be evacuated and sent to state-run collective shelters as these are considered unsafe due to the prevalence of sexual abuse and exploitation committed by state actors (particularly the military) and by shelter managers who take advantage of the vulnerability of the population under their care.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, access to food and medical attention is often deliberately withheld by response actors, who demand transactional sex or sexual 'favours' in exchange for humanitarian aid. This abuse of power is further manifested in cases of corruption, coercion and intentional deprivation of services based on political affiliation, socio-economic status or ethnicity, the latter predominantly targeting Haitian immigrants and Dominicans of Haitian descent who are systematically denied access to basic aid or services, and in some cases are even banned from using the shelters.<sup>3</sup> Cases of sex trafficking and forced prostitution rings, as well as child labour and abuse, have also been reported in these settings, particularly in marginalised urban areas.

The consortium's one-year pilot programme, culminating in September 2016, aimed to set up community-based protection brigades to address these threats, targeting the riverside urban *barrios* in the city of San Cristóbal where the combination of poverty and lack of adequate land planning has resulted in thousands living on the flood plain of the River Nigua. As already happened in 2007 with tropical storms Noel and Olga, these communities are all at extreme risk of being washed away when the next hurricane, tropical storm or flash flood takes place.

In this framework, efforts have been focused on training and organising San Cristóbal's riverside communities in disaster risk reduction and management through the formation of community-led disaster preparedness, mitigation and response networks in each neighbourhood. Each network comprises 25-30 community members, specifically recruited to ensure a good gender and age balance – with the participation of women and men from young adults to the elderly – as well as the inclusion of members who are generally left



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out from collective decision-making spaces, such as people living with disability within the community and Haitian immigrants.

These community-based DRR networks are structured in units consisting of 6-10 members, with each unit receiving several months of specialist training in a different aspect of disaster response: evacuation and rescue, WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene), communication or shelter management. While these aspects are all part of the traditional roles played by community-based DRR networks around the world, the project sought specifically to train members of the shelter management unit to form a specialised protection brigade, a pilot initiative which if effective could be replicated within and outside the Dominican Republic.

### Protection brigades

As part of the objective to integrate protection effectively into disaster risk preparedness at the community level, all network members were trained in protection measures and principles, including how to provide assistance adapted to the specific needs of women, children, elderly, people with disability, people living with HIV/AIDS or other chronic illnesses, and immigrant (predominantly Haitian) populations. Protection brigades then carry out the crucial task of putting these principles into concrete action. After additional training in prevention of sexual abuse and exploitation as well as child protection, these community-based protection brigades also act as a monitoring, prevention and response mechanism inside the collective shelters in the face of recurrent cases of sexual violence and other kinds of abuse of power. This includes guaranteeing access to reference and complaints mechanisms in cases of rights violations, ensuring victims are responded to and receive proper care through appropriate channels, and providing accompaniment throughout the process.

While the community-based DRR networks are integrated into the national disaster risk management system under the supervision and coordination of the Civil Defence, protection brigades also

benefit from working directly with the state's social protection agencies, a crucial element in guaranteeing their effectiveness and sustainability. Therefore, one or two focal points were selected within each team for the purpose of official liaison between the affected population and the local government's justice department and social protection services, specifically with the provincial representatives of the Ministry of Women, the Child Protection Welfare Agency, National Agency for Disability, Public Health Services and the Office of the Attorney General.

With the aim of institutionalising this coordination, specific emergency protection protocols were established in conjunction with these state actors, who up until now had little access to or knowledge of abuses occurring during emergency settings in their jurisdiction. By establishing a coordination mechanism between the government's social protection agencies at the provincial level and the community-based protection brigades in the field, it is hoped that a greater number of cases in emergency settings will be responded to and channelled appropriately through the state's protection and justice systems.

All countries in this region, and particularly the small island developing states in the Caribbean, face the certainty of a disaster sooner or later. Ensuring that protection measures and mechanisms are integrated into disaster risk reduction and preparedness efforts, particularly at the community level, can go a long way to safeguarding human rights when and where disaster strikes.

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1. Funded in the framework of ECHO's Disaster Preparedness Program (DIPECHO) in the Caribbean.
2. Casares García R (2013) *Mujeres y Niñas en Contextos de Desastre: Tres Estudios de Caso sobre Vulnerabilidades y Capacidades en la República Dominicana*, Oxfam/Plan International. <http://bit.ly/Oxfam-Plan-mujeres-ninas-DomRep-2013>
3. Oxfam/Plan International/Habitat for Humanity (2014) *DIPECHO 2015-2016 Needs Assessment on Protection Needs in DRR*.