



The Ozama River in Santo Domingo flooded during Hurricane Matthew in 2016. Photo credit: Tatiana Fernández/Oxfam in the Dominican Republic

INSTITUTIONALIZING PROTECTION IN DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

A case study from the Dominican Republic

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Due to its geographical location, the Dominican Republic is highly prone to the impacts of natural hazards, which, in combination with the existing underlying factors of widespread inequality and impoverishment, result all too often in disaster. As a consequence, the country is faced with large scale disaster-induced displacements on a recurrent basis. Addressing protection as a key element of disaster risk management – at national, provincial, municipal and community level – is imperative in the quest to safeguard human rights during these emergency situations.



1 INTRODUCTION

CONTEXT

According to the latest estimates of the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, an average of 26.4 million people in over 100 countries were displaced by disasters each year during the period 2008–2015.¹ Among these countries, small island developing states (SIDS) have been disproportionately affected by disaster-induced displacement, having experienced, relative to their population size, displacement levels three times higher than the global average during this period.²

One such country is the Dominican Republic, which, due to its geographical location, is extremely prone not only to hurricanes, tropical storms, as well as significant floods and droughts, but is also exposed to high levels of seismic risk. On a periodic basis, the country is impacted by major hydro-meteorological events, which in combination with underlying conditions of extreme inequality, widespread impoverishment and poor land-use regulation, result all too often in disasters and large-scale population displacements.

THE IMPACT OF DISASTERS

With an average estimate of 24,543 people displaced by disaster each year, the Dominican Republic has the fourth highest rate of disaster-induced displacement within the region.³ Among the most significant recent examples is category three Hurricane George in 1998, which left over 85,000 internally displaced and 350 dead. In 2004, the flash flood tragedy of Jimaní left 688 dead, fully erasing several communities from the map and leaving around 1000 families displaced.⁴ In 2007, tropical storms Noel and Olga left over 140,000 internally displaced and caused between 120–300 million dollars in damages.⁵ In 2016, category four Hurricane Matthew left 37,809 people displaced and severe material damage across 16 provinces. In 2017, hurricanes Irma and María left a total of 50,000 people internally displaced and affected over 10,000 homes.⁶



Source: <http://www.worldmap1.com/maps-dominican-republic>

Year of impact	Tropical storms and/or hurricanes
2003	Mindy, Odette
2004	Ivan, Jeanne
2005	Alpha
2006	Chris, Ernesto
2007	Dean, Noel, Olga
2008	Fay, Gustav, Hanna
2009	Ana
2010	Tomas
2011	Emily, Irene
2012	Sandy, Isaac
2013	Chantal, Gabrielle
2014	Bertha, Gonzalo
2015	Erika
2016	Matthew
2017	Irma, María

Protracted internal displacement

Though the impact of these meteorological events and the emergencies themselves normally receive attention from state response actors, interest usually drops dramatically after the immediate response and early recovery stages. As a result, there is often little or a complete lack of government follow-up and media monitoring regarding the situation of internally displaced populations, leading to the alarming – yet barely identified and rarely recognized – issue of protracted displacement across the country.

Rendered almost completely invisible without any existing registry or census, thousands of families displaced by these events continue to live in the ‘temporary refuges’ they were originally relocated to by the government, waiting for years, if not decades, to be resettled or sent back to their places of origin. In reality, these ‘refuges’ are no more than *barracones* – improvised shacks made from tin, carton, mud or canvas – often located in high risk zones with no access to any basic services and in generally crowded and poor conditions.

Protection risks

In these recurring and often fragile emergency situations, underlying and pre-existing social issues are almost always exacerbated. As a result, even before affected communities are confronted with the issue of protracted displacement or a failure by the authorities to respect their housing rights, they are also often exposed to a wide range of human rights violations and protection risks both during and after emergencies.

For example, many Dominicans living in high-risk zones refuse to be evacuated and sent to state-run shelters, as these are considered highly unsafe due to the prevalence of sexual abuse and exploitation committed by some state response actors (particularly the military) and shelter staff who take advantage of the vulnerability of the population under their care.⁷ Specifically, access to food and medical attention is at times deliberately withheld by some response actors, who demand transactional sex or sexual ‘favours’ in exchange for humanitarian aid.⁸

This abuse of power is further manifested in cases of corruption, coercion, and intentional deprivation of services based on political affiliation, socioeconomic status or ethnicity, the latter predominantly targeting Haitian migrants and Dominicans of Haitian descent who are systematically denied access to basic aid or services, and in some cases are even banned from utilizing the shelters.⁹ Cases of sex trafficking and forced prostitution rings, as well as child labour and abuse have also been reported in these settings, particularly in urban and/or border areas.¹⁰

INSTITUTIONALIZING PROTECTION

A shift in approach

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 situations, 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 (DRR) and prevention efforts.

In this regard, strengthening states' disaster prevention and response capacities and institutionalizing protection mechanisms as part of their disaster risk management (DRM) policies and contingency plans – *before* disaster strikes – is a crucial task for any serious attempt to safeguard the rights of affected populations during emergencies. This includes the institutionalization of protection protocols that consider the specific needs of diverse segments of the population according to gender, age, disability and physical and health conditions, paying particular attention to the protection of groups at higher risk such as women, children, senior adults, people with disabilities, persons living with HIV/AIDS or other chronic illnesses, as well as Haitian migrants and Dominicans of Haitian descent.

Oxfam's protection framework

Following the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, Oxfam committed to the centrality of protection in all humanitarian programmes at the global level, taking concrete action to reduce situations of violence and abuse as well as guaranteeing the protection of human rights of people affected by emergencies. This commitment emphasizes Oxfam's aim to specifically tackle gender-based violence (GBV) and increase its investment in community-based protection programmes – an effort that has been undertaken by Oxfam in the Dominican Republic's recent pilot programme to integrate protection into DRM.

Integrating protection into disaster risk reduction

As part of ECHO's Disaster Preparedness Program (DIPECHO) in Latin America and the Caribbean 2015–2016, a consortium of organizations comprising Oxfam, Plan International and Habitat for Humanity in the Dominican Republic sought to address humanitarian protection as a central focus of their interventions – a pilot initiative that officially tackled protection as a main programme pillar, rather than a traditional mainstream approach, for the first time in the country. With the overall goal of introducing and institutionalizing protection at all levels of DRR, the project worked simultaneously at three levels, spearheading distinct initiatives at state, provincial/municipal and community levels.

2 THE STATE LEVEL

PROTECTION, GENDER AND AGE ADVISORY GROUP (EC-PGE)

Addressing the gap

Following the deadly impact of Hurricane George in 1998 and faced with the need to address the permanent risk of disaster in a more proactive and comprehensive manner, the Dominican government created the country's first National Disaster Risk Management System in 2002 with Law 147-02. Since then, the country has made important strides in committing efforts towards DRR, assisted in large part by significant international aid.

However, despite the country's noticeable advances over the past 15 years, the social and human dimension of disasters has been largely overlooked. In particular, the safeguarding of the human rights of affected and displaced populations remained mainly unrecognized by state entities and officials, resulting in its complete absence from DRM policies and decision-making processes. As a direct response to the lack of information around the subject, a series of recent studies and assessments have sought to bring light to the ongoing violations of rights that have taken place during recurrent disasters, and how certain segments of the population are being disproportionately affected.¹¹

The findings have shown the prevalence of a wide range of human rights abuses that occur in these emergency contexts. These include the high incidence of situations of sexual exploitation and abuse perpetrated by emergency response personnel within state-run shelters; cases of corruption, coercion and abuse of power also committed by the latter; as well as child abuse, human trafficking and the deliberate deprivation of Haitian migrants and Dominicans of Haitian descent of access to services and aid.¹²








Establishment of the EC-PGE

In this light, the Oxfam-Plan International-Habitat for Humanity consortium sought to work directly with the central government to highlight the pressing need to fully address these human rights violations and protection risks in emergency settings. Following an advocacy strategy that capitalized on existing stipulations bestowed by Law 147-02, which allows the government to create expert advisory platforms, the Dominican government agreed to the creation of the *Equipo Consultivo de Protección, Género y Edad* (EC-PGE), a Protection, Gender and Age Advisory Group within its National Emergency Commission.

Launched in February 2016, the EC-PGE is a multi-stakeholder advisory platform officially embedded within the National Disaster Risk Management System. Its main objective is to ensure the protection of people affected and displaced by disaster and guarantee the safeguarding of human rights in emergencies through the systematization, coordination and operationalization of protection measures and mechanisms among relevant actors.

The EC-PGE comprises 44 institutions, bringing together, for the first time in the country's history, state emergency response actors and social protection institutions, United Nations agencies, INGOs and leading civil society organizations specializing in the protection of children, women,

people with disabilities, senior adults, people with HIV/AIDS or chronic illness, and migrant populations.

Member Institutions of the EC-PGE*				
Population	State response and/or protection agencies	United Nations and donors	International NGOs	Civil society organizations
 General/response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civil Defense • Dominican Red Cross • National Police • National Firefighters • INESPRES • Ministry of the Environment • Ministry of the Presidency • SIUBEN • National District City Council 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AECID • UNDP • WFP • OCHA • RedHum • FAO 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oxfam • IDDI 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FLACSO • Disaster Risk Management Forum
 Women and girls	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ministry of Women 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UNFPA • UN Women 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • INSALUD
 Children and adolescents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Agency for Children and Adolescent Welfare (CONANI) • Ministry of Education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UNICEF 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan International • World Vision 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caritas Dominicana
 Senior adults	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Agency for the Elderly (CONAPE) 			
 People with disabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Disability Agency (CONADIS) 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women with Disabilities Network (CIMUDIS) • Fundación ProBien • Red Iberoamericana
 People with HIV/AIDS or chronic illness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Agency for HIV/AIDS (CONAVIHSIDA) • Ministry of Public Health (MSP) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PAHO/WHO • UNAIDS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doctors of the World 	
 Migrant population	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Institute for Migration (INM) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UNHCR • IOM 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MUDHA • MOSCHTA

*Note that some institutions and/or NGOs might work with more than one population group, and their placement in one category does not exempt them from their work or expertise in other areas.

As an official state-sponsored platform, the EC-PGE is led by the national government's central emergency response actor, the Civil Defense, and the country's eight main social protection governing institutions: the Ministry of Women; the Ministry of Education; the National Agency for Child and Adolescent Welfare; the National Disability Agency; the National Agency for the Elderly; the National Agency for HIV/AIDS; the National Migration Institute; and the Human Rights division of the Office of the Attorney General.

Recognizing that some protection efforts, even if uncoordinated or unstructured, have been undertaken in the past by member institutions, the group's first task was to establish an internal baseline and identify existing policy and operational gaps within the current system. Following this process, each population group sub-sector prioritized and agreed upon a set of concrete actions on which to focus its efforts during the following year. In addition to each sub-sector's action plan, the EC-PGE also works as an overall group. It decided to first tackle its most pressing needs:

1. Render emergency response personnel at field level accountable for their actions.
2. Establish nationwide protection standards for both prevention and response to human rights violations.
3. Train field staff and emergency response personnel on operational protection measures.

The Humanitarian Protection Guidelines for Emergency Response Personnel

To address these needs, the EC-PGE envisioned the establishment of official protection guidelines to be used as a nationwide standard, including the strengthening of referral pathways to prevent and respond to different kinds of rights violations, thus helping ensure accountability by government response personnel. As a result, in September 2016, the EC-PGE finalized its first product, the national ***Humanitarian Protection Guidelines for Emergency Response Personnel***,¹³ which is now being disseminated and socialized with emergency response and social protection staff at the provincial and municipal levels throughout the country.

The guidelines have been adopted by and incorporated into the official curriculum of the National Disaster Risk Management Training Centre, which, it is hoped, will lay the foundation for its future impact and help to ensure its sustainability. As a following step, the EC-PGE plans to adapt the Humanitarian Protection Guidelines to user-friendly formats that can be disseminated and used at the community level, including widespread use by the Civil Defense and Red Cross volunteers. It also plans to create visual-based protection reference signboards to be utilized in all state-run shelters across the country, in order to empower affected populations to demand their rights and ensure greater accountability from response personnel.

DRM plans for state protection agencies

In addition to the establishment of the Humanitarian Protection Guidelines and a nationwide protection standard, the EC-PGE's central objectives also include the creation of an **institutional DRM plan** for each of the national government's eight social protection governing institutions. Spearheading the pilot initiative, the National Disability Agency (CONADIS) became the first of these institutions to successfully finalize this process in August 2016, creating the country's first official DRM plan focused on addressing the specific needs and safeguarding the rights and well-being of people with disabilities. The plan includes both a national protocol for its central office as well as a provincial/municipal protocol to be followed by each of CONADIS' field liaisons across the country. Following CONADIS' successful experience as a model, the remaining seven social

protection governing institutions will establish their own institutional DRM plans as part of the EC-PGE's main objectives.

GBV prevention and response mechanisms

The Ministry of Women's Affairs has committed to creating its own DRM plan, and to training all its field staff in protection measures in emergency situations. This will include the strengthening and standardization of GBV response mechanisms at national level, the integration of their staff in provincial and municipal response teams by playing a crucial role in supporting the Civil Defense in shelter management, as well as guaranteeing the dissemination of the national GBV hotline through all actors and in all shelters.

Achievements and Challenges

Overall, the institutionalization of these efforts through existing government structures, the empowerment and strengthening of key government duty-bearer institutions, as well as the appropriation of this process by the central government, have all been crucial elements propelling the EC-PGE's success. During UNISDR's 2017 Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction, Dominican authorities officially presented the EC-PGE and its *Humanitarian Protection Guidelines* as one of the country's main advancements vis-à-vis the implementation of the Sendai Framework for DRR.¹⁴ Similarly, during the same conference, ECHO also presented the EC-PGE and its current work as one of the best examples of good practice resulting from their DIPECHO programmes in Latin America and the Caribbean.

However, despite the platform's notable progress and accomplishments thus far, the EC-PGE still faces significant challenges ahead, particularly in relation to its long-term sustainability when considering its highly ambitious objective as well as the elevated number and diverse nature of its members. Continuing to support the institutional strengthening process of its member institutions, as well as managing and facilitating coordination efforts within the platform, will be a vital endeavour in ensuring the viability of this initiative in the years to come.

3 THE PROVINCIAL AND MUNICIPAL LEVEL

STRENGTHENING THE CAPACITY OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Tackling DRR in urban settings

In addition to its national-scale strategy, the 2015–2016 DIPECHO project was also designed with a strong field component implemented in the city of San Cristobal, one of the country's largest urban areas. The city is characterized by informal construction and significant overpopulation. Chosen as a pilot site due to its high level of seismic risk and exposure to recurrent floods, San Cristobal faces large population displacements on a periodic basis, as a large proportion of its population lives in urban *barrios* located in the floodplains of the River Nigua.

As part of the intervention, the project sought to specifically work on the strengthening and capacity building of local authorities and DRM structures. Law 147-02 stipulates that each province and municipality should have a Comité de Prevención, Mitigación, y Respuesta ante Desastres (CPMR), which are DRM units in charge of prevention, mitigation and response measures in their areas of jurisdiction. The CPMRs are presided over by the governor and mayor of each locality, and comprise local response actors – the Civil Defense, the Red Cross, the National Police and Firefighters – as well as local representatives of diverse ministries and institutions who have a role in DRM. The project worked directly to strengthen the capacities of two CPMRs, that of the province of San Cristobal and the municipality of Cambita.

Integrating protection into provincial and municipal DRM units (CPMRs)

Though the strengthening of government DRM structures at local level is a traditional component of disaster risk preparedness programmes across the world, the project sought from the outset to integrate protection as a main pillar of intervention for the first time in the country. In doing so, the project's primary objective was to implement a pilot experience that could be replicated by the central government throughout other provinces and municipalities in the future.

The strategy to introduce and institutionalize protection within the CPMR structures comprised the following four key elements:

1. Integration of local protection authorities and organizations into the provincial and municipal CPMR.
2. Training of all CPMR members on protection principles and operational measures.
3. Establishment of a specific protection protocol within the CPMR's DRM and emergency response plans.
4. Strengthening of existing protection referral systems and direct liaison with community representatives.

As a result of this process, the local representatives of the Ministry of Women, the National Disability Agency, the Ministry of Education and the Office of the Attorney General were officially integrated into San Cristobal's CPMR. Similarly, leading local civil society organizations working on social protection issues were also incorporated into Cambita's CPMR, including associations of people with disabilities, university students and a women farmers' collective.

A specific protection protocol was established during the development of the CPMR's DRM and emergency response plans, which included operational protection measures to be implemented by evacuation and shelter management teams. In addition, through coordination with the local social protection authorities which now formed part of the CPMR, the available referral pathways for different types of rights violations were also integrated into the provincial and municipal emergency response plans. This included response protocols for domestic and gender-based violence, child separation, abandonment and/or abuse, human trafficking, and specific assistance for people with disabilities. There was also special emphasis on creating a roster of the existing community-based protection brigades as part of the protection protocol to ensure coordination between national government response actors and community leaders (*see the next section*).

The process to empower and strengthen the CPMR's member institutions was also a main achievement of this pilot experience, as well as a key factor helping to promote its sustainability. For example, on its own initiative, San Cristobal's Provincial Department of the Ministry of Public Health decided to train all its medical and administrative personnel in DRM and protection measures in emergencies. This included training in the appropriate case management protocols for situations of violence and/or abuse which present in hospitals and health centres, in liaison with the National Police, the Ministry of Women and the Office of the Attorney General.

4 COMMUNITY LEVEL

COMMUNITY-BASED PROTECTION BRIGADES

Local communities as first responders

In many countries, during or immediately after a disaster, government 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 government duty-bearers, who are most likely to be the first responders and provide lifesaving measures. 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 situations. As key stakeholders, communities can – and should – have a decisive role in the protection and defence of their own rights.

It is within this context that the Oxfam-Plan International-Habitat for Humanity consortium sought to work at the community level with 10 riverside urban *barrios* at high risk of disaster-induced displacement in the city of San Cristobal, where the combination of poverty and lack of adequate land planning has resulted in thousands living on the floodplain of the River Nigua. As had 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. The consortium's one-year pilot programme, culminating in September 2016, aimed to set up community protection brigades to address existing and recurrent threats within newly established community-based DRR networks.

Community-based DRR networks

At field level, the DIPECHO project focused on training and organizing San Cristobal's riverside urban communities in DRR and management through the creation of community-led disaster prevention, mitigation and response networks (*redes comunitarias de prevención, mitigación y respuesta ante desastres*) in each *barrio*. 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 a young age to senior adults – as well as the inclusion of community members who are generally left out of collective decision-making spaces, such as people living with disabilities within the community, Haitian migrants and Dominicans of Haitian descent.

These community-based DRR networks are structured as units consisting of six to 10 members, with each unit receiving several months of specialist training in a different aspect of disaster response: evacuation and rescue, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), 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 specialized 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 effectively integrate protection into disaster risk preparedness at 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, senior adults, people with disabilities, people living with HIV/AIDS or other chronic illnesses, and migrant (predominantly Haitian) populations. Protection brigades, are then responsible for putting these principles into concrete action.

'I think so many of us see emergencies in a completely different way now. We would all see each other as being equally affected by disasters, but it's not true. The elderly, the children, people with disabilities, they all have different needs and require special attention. It's our responsibility as a community to protect and look after each other, and make sure no one is abused or taken advantage of. It's a matter of safeguarding our human dignity.'
– Juana, 29, Community Mobilizer from Las Flores, San Cristobal

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 state-run shelters in the face of recurrent cases of sexual violence and other kinds of abuse of power. This includes guaranteeing access to referral 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.

Coordination with government protection actors and referral systems

While the community-based DRR networks are integrated into the national DRM system under the supervision and coordination of the Civil Defense and each locality's CPMR, protection brigades also benefit from working directly with the government's social protection agencies, a crucial element in helping to ensure their effectiveness and sustainability. In this light, one or two focal points were selected within each team to officially liaise 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 National Agency for Child and Adolescent Welfare, the National Disability Agency, public health services and the Office of the Attorney General.

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

Community response

In addition to working with DRR community networks, the project also worked with community members in the 11 *barrios* in San Cristobal where the intervention took place. A total of 430 community mobilizers, 250 Civil Defense and Red Cross community volunteers, and members of a local seniors' home as well as a foundation for people with disabilities, were trained in DRR, with

protection measures included as a core part of their training. These protection modules focused on people's rights, and adapted assistance as well as operational measures and referral pathways to prevent and respond to potential cases of abuse in emergency situations. Throughout the project, these modules were consistently a thought-provoking and impactful part of trainings:

'We didn't realize that we don't lose our rights in an emergency setting, even if you've been displaced by a flood and find yourself in a shelter. We didn't know that we could hold authorities accountable and denounce situations where people take advantage of others. Now, we have the knowledge to defend ourselves and those around us.'

– Genita, Community member from 5 de Abril, San Cristóbal

5 CONCLUSIONS

PRELIMINARY IMPACT

The impact of Category 4 Hurricane Matthew on the Dominican Republic in October 2016 provided the first disaster scenario in which the project's results were put to the test. During the emergency, key state institutions in charge of protection that had been strengthened during the project, including the Ministry of Women and the National Disability Agency, successfully activated their provincial and municipal networks to operate alongside the Civil Defense. Members of the EC-PGE collectively monitored and coordinated actions on the field with response actors. The CPMRs of San Cristobal and Cambita were both activated, responding to the needs of families displaced by the flooding of the River Nigua, in coordination and with the support of the community-based DRR networks in each *barrio*. Moreover, local representatives of the newly integrated social protection agencies and organizations successfully formed part of the CPMRs' response.

Similarly, during Hurricane Irma and its aftermath in September 2017, members of the EC-PGE and the social protection government institutions actively formed part of the national Emergency Operations Center (COE) and its diverse response committees, including the social assistance and shelter management units. The National Disability Agency carried out an accessible communications campaign in preparation for the hurricane, and for the first time in the country, official nationwide communications from the Emergency Operations Center were broadcast with a sign language interpreter.

Despite these positive results, however, it is worth noting that both hurricanes Matthew and Irma did not cause a national-scale disaster, but rather produced contained impacts that caused damage in specific provinces. In this sense, it is yet to be seen whether these actors and structures at all three levels (national, provincial/municipal and community) will be able to respond effectively to a disaster of a larger magnitude.

LESSONS

Following the experience and results of this pilot initiative, Oxfam in the Dominican Republic has decided to officially integrate protection as a main pillar of its humanitarian program. In doing so, it wishes to serve as a model for other countries in the region that have the potential to implement a similar initiative. Key lessons learned throughout this process include:

Overall

- Humanitarian protection should be incorporated as an **integral part of DRR** and preparedness efforts, not only at response stages.
- There is a **potential for great impact** in addressing protection as a main pillar of DRM, rather than a traditional mainstream approach.
- It is possible to move beyond protection as a conceptual framework within DRM and **operationalize** it into concrete and tangible measures at all levels – national, provincial, municipal and community.

- **Follow-up** should be provided during future emergency situations to assess the efficacy and/or viability of the pilot intervention at all three levels.

National government level

- There has been great value in **bridging the gap** between government response actors (who lacked expertise on protection issues) and social protection agencies (who were not part of the DRM system) through a multi-sector protection platform such as the EC-PGE.
- The success of the EC-PGE has been largely due to the **empowerment** and strengthening of key government duty-bearer institutions as well as the **appropriation** of this process by the central government.
- The creation of the EC-PGE as part of an **existing legal government structure** has been a key element fuelling its viability and credibility, adding value to the process and effectively institutionalizing the initiative.

Provincial and municipal level

- The empowerment of **local authorities** in protection measures can have far-reaching and highly effective results, as they have the ability to implement and operationalize these measures on a tangible scale.
- Integrating local protection authorities and organizations into the provincial and municipal DRM units (CPMRs) has significantly strengthened their **scope of work** and garnered strong results.
- Helping establish and/or strengthen **concrete protection mechanisms** through local authorities and structures has the potential to yield great impact.

Community level

- Communities assume the role of **first responders** in emergency situations, and as such, they can – and should – be active participants in advocating for and overseeing the fulfilment of their own rights.
- Integrating **protection brigades** as part of existing community-based DRR networks (rather than establishing additional separate structures) has been a key element in helping to ensure their sustainability.
- Establishing a proper liaison and **coordination mechanism** between community-based protection brigades and government DRM such as the Civil Defense, as well as social protection agencies, is crucial to effectively implementing protection measures and appropriately channelling cases to the right referral systems.

Indeed, all countries in the region, particularly the small island developing states (SIDS) in the Caribbean, face the certainty of natural hazards sooner or later. Ensuring that protection measures and mechanisms are addressed as a key element of DRR and preparedness efforts at all levels – national, provincial, municipal and community – can go a long way towards securing human rights when and where disaster strikes.

NOTES

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