

Disaster Co-management in the Caribbean Through NGO and Community Participation

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Abstract

The general increase in the level of disaster awareness in the Caribbean and the particular role of non-governmental organisations is examined in the context of the need for greater co-management of disasters in the region. Special importance is also being attached to their work on account of their increased presence since the 1980s and their focus on development at the level of communities. The NGOs and the community organisations they serve are improving their capabilities in the various areas of disaster management and especially in disaster prevention and mitigation in spite of operational constraints. The need to strengthen these organisations and integrate them into national disaster plans are also receiving increasing attention as the full participation of people at the community level has now become a critical requirement for effective disaster management in the region.

Introduction

The decade of the 1980s was a period of special significance in the Caribbean in terms of the efforts made at all levels to address the problem of the region's vulnerability to hurricanes and other natural hazards. It is a period that had special meaning as they emerged in numbers to question the approaches to development in the region and to take the lead in addressing a number of problems. One of their concerns was the responses to the many disasters which the region experienced during the period.

The decade, which was ushered in by Hurricane David in 1979 with its devastation, saw regional governments being propelled to seek technical assistance to improve existing systems and structures and to put new ones into place. The assistance provided through the ten year Pan Caribbean Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Product (PCDPPP) proved extremely valuable in raising public awareness and laying the foundation for improved preparedness and response mechanisms.

The disaster of 1979, and others which occurred during the period, had their own special value. They made people more aware and reminded them of the region's and their own vulnerability to hurricanes and other natural phenomenon. The emergence of television and its ability to bring the most vivid pictures of disasters into the homes of people in the region helped to make them 'real', especially in territories where their wrath had been forgotten or never experienced.

These developments paved the way for an ongoing campaign to make disaster preparedness and management 'everybody's business' and to decentralise national disaster plans so that they could become more effective. It was also realised that in the development of such plans, there was an important role for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the community-based development organisations they support and that they should be integrated into those plans.

Although NGOs had emerged to look at the more developmental concerns, they also found themselves compelled to become involved in response activities in the aftermath of the disasters caused by Hurricanes Gilbert and Hugo in 1988 and 1989 respectively. Such events could be linked to the developmental problems in the region and they provided a good opportunity to demonstrate some new approaches

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The Nature and Role of NGOs in the Caribbean

NGOs in the Caribbean serve a range of purposes. Generally, they function either as welfare or as development organisations. Church organisations usually function as welfare or charitable bodies but some do have a dual role. For example, the Caribbean Conference of Churches (CCC), a body formed by the mainline churches in the region and, in existence since the early 1970s, is first and foremost a development organisation. It, however, becomes involved in disaster response activities as it considers such activities part of its Christian mission. The Salvation Army, because of the nature of its work generally and especially at times of disasters and other emergencies, is generally regarded as a welfare organisation.

The traditional role of an organisation such as the Red Cross has been to provide relief and emergency assistance to victims of a disaster and other life threatening events and can therefore be described as a welfare organisation.

NGOs involved in development work in the region make up a significant part of the NGO community. Their number increased significantly during the 1980s and it continues to grow as governments become less able to cater to the needs of people in the region, in the face of worsening economic and social conditions. Promotion and facilitation of integrated and participatory community development have as a result become important goals for such NGOs. Some of them actually represent special interest groups such as women and youth.

In 1989, the number of such organisations in only seven countries in the region (Belize, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Grenada, Jamaica, St Lucia, and St Vincent and the Grenadines) amounted to over 70. The number of organisations involved in such activities continues to increase as many of the traditional welfare organisations are incorporating development components into their overall programmes. The regional offices of CARITAS International, a charitable organisation sponsored by the Roman Catholic Church, is one such example. Several national, sub-regional and regional organisations have also emerged to co ordinate and give support to the work of local groups. Some of the more well established ones are:

National Organisations:

- Association of National Development Agencies (ANDA), Belize
- Association of Developing Agencies (ADA), Jamaica
- Grenada Community Development Agency (GRENCODA)
- National Alliance of Development Agencies (NADO)
- St Vincent and the Grenadines

Sub-regional and Regional Organisations:

- Caribbean People's Development Agency (CARIPEDA), St Vincent
- Caribbean Network for Integrated Rural Development (CNIRD), Trinidad
- Women and Development Unit (WAND), UWI, Barbados
- Leeward Islands National Development Agency (LINDA), Antigua
- Caribbean Conference of Churches (CCC), Barbados

Disaster-related Activities of NGOs

NGOs in the region are still best known for the traditional activities they carry out in responding to the needs of people who have been affected by disasters and other emergencies. As already indicated, organisations like the Red Cross and the Salvation Army see this as their primary mission. They have as a result become well organised and are recognised regionally and internationally on account of their capabilities in this area.

Churches and church organisations have similar roles. They are, however, much less organised and therefore operate on a much smaller scale. Since its inception, the CCC has been functioning primarily in this manner through its special Disaster Emergency Relief and Welfare Programme. Through this programme, it channels assistance through local ecumenical church bodies and member churches. CARITAS offices in the region have also operated in a similar manner through its network of charitable Roman Catholic Church bodies, the St Vincent De Paul Societies, in the various territories.

The serious developmental problems in the region, which become increasingly evident in the region during the 1980s, prompted new and alternative development approaches and the formation of the relatively large number of development oriented NGOs. It was no longer gratifying to respond to disasters in a purely reactive manner. Responses needed to be more developmental as the victims remained poor and still very vulnerable when programmes of assistance ended. Improved disaster management, and especially the aspects of disaster prevention and mitigation, were therefore considered essential elements in any development plan in the context of the Caribbean. Programmes being implemented by some of these NGOs reflect this philosophy.

NGOs as Promoters of Improved Disaster Preparedness

NGOs have been involved in promoting improved disaster preparedness and disaster management since the early 1980s. Some of the more important areas of activities are:

(1) **Integration of NGOs and community-based.** They have been campaigning for their integration into regional and national planning activities to ensure the participation and involvement of community-based organisations in national disaster plans. The need for such inclusions in local disaster committees and in planning activities has not yet been fully recognised. Problems still exist as to the form which such participation should take. The hope is that this would become clearer as community organisations continue to demonstrate their capabilities in the various areas of disaster management.

At the regional level, the participation of NGOs has been recognised to a greater extent. This was manifested in the inclusion of a representative of the League of the Red Cross Societies (LORCS) on the PCDPPP Team. It turned out however that the particular focus of the Red Cross did not permit adequate presentation of the perspectives of developmental NGOs in the region. Their viewpoints were not as a result incorporated into the operational framework of regional and national disaster plans to any significant extent.

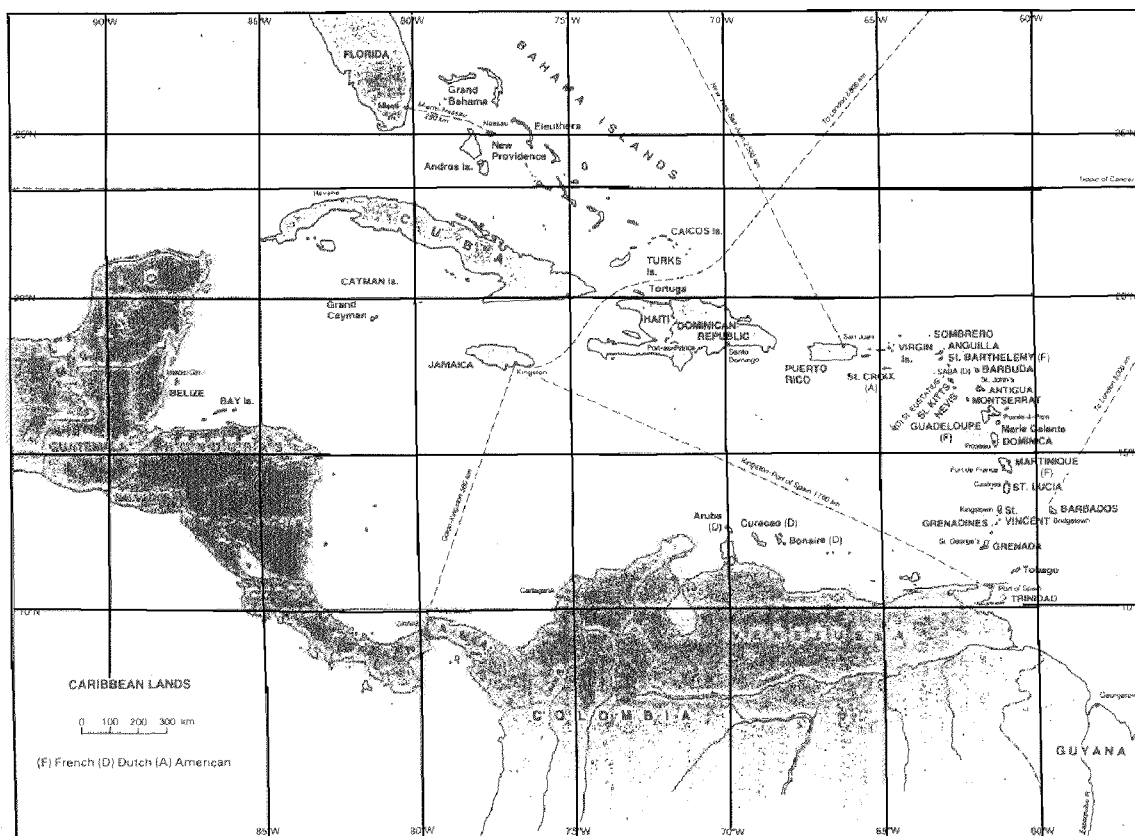
Fortunately, the importance of the integration of community organisations to ensure community participation has been recognised by the Caribbean Disaster Emergency and Response agency (CDERA). Improved levels of integration are, therefore, to be expected. Opportunities such as the conferences do enable further lobbying and will continue to be embraced. The development and strengthening of co-operative links with local disaster offices and regional disaster and with other agencies have been taking place and is greatly facilitating the work of NGOs.

(2) Disaster prevention and mitigation: NGOs were able to demonstrate several new approaches to making disaster response more developmental following the devastation of Jamaica in 1988 by Hurricane Gilbert. In the strategy developed for responding to the disaster, three stages were identified to guide the activity. This framework was again used in the response to the disasters caused in islands in the North Eastern Caribbean by Hurricane Hugo, a year later. The general plan calls for three phases of activity.

1. Short-term – Relief work (two weeks)
2. Medium-term – Rehabilitation and reconstruction (three months) and maintaining an element of relief
3. Long-term – Reconstruction and development

A shelter clinic programme for improved house construction was introduced by ADA, in conjunction with the Jamaica Institute of Architects and with financial support from CCC, and was carried out in an effort to reduce the vulnerability of houses owned by members of poor rural communities. It is a practical scheme in which members of the selected community come together with local tradesmen to participate in constructing a basic 12ftx10ft unit. The programme had four basic goals: (1) To educate community members about safe building practices; (2) To strengthen community self help, community confidence and the building of local organisations; (3) To encourage networking at different levels of society, especially between community groups, development agencies and professional and other national bodies. (4) To influence national housing policy using the experiences gained and the lessons learnt. The programme, which saw a total of 14 units built and between about 34 to 72 persons participating in each clinic, proved highly successful. The skills acquired by the tradesmen and the knowledge gained by members of the communities on safe house construction were applied in the repair and reconstruction activities carried out in the same communities.

As a result of the positive responses the programme received, it was adopted as a core activity in the rehabilitation programmes in Montserrat, Antigua and Puerto Rico following the passage of Hurricane Hugo, a year later. In Montserrat where a further ten units were built, the techniques were adopted by the Government and residents in the construction of new houses. The programme has since become part of CCC's ongoing disaster programme and is being used as the basis for carrying out retro-fitting activities in target communities. One such programme was conducted in rural Grenada between 1992 and 1993.



Map of the Caribbean.

Provision of Support for Rehabilitation Projects

Most of the projects supported during the rehabilitation stage were aimed at getting economic activities restarted. They included getting fish nets repaired, distributing seeds, and day-old chicks, and creating tool-pools for agricultural work. A novel approach to ensuring the establishment of a secure financial base for some members of a particular rural community entailed the provision of a combination of relief and loan funding. The funding was entrusted to the local credit union so that the members could have easy access to credit once they became members. Initial quantities of day-old chicks were given to the individuals as gifts to enable the beneficiaries to start small chicken farms.

Training

Activities have included both the acquisition and the provision of training in areas of disaster preparedness and management. NGOs have identified the need for trained personnel at community level and are targeting leaders and other members of community-based organisations, as well as church leaders involved in community work. Several training seminars and workshops on disaster preparedness and management for community workers in which NGOs have made inputs have already been held. One such exercise was held in Montserrat in 1990. It was organised by the Community Development Department and facilitated by personnel from the Women and Development Unit of the UWI (WAND), the Sistren Theatre Collective of Jamaica, and CCC.

Plans for other training programmes exist. One such programme will be conducted jointly by CCC and CARITAS Antilles. It has been developed to train would-be-trainers in various territories. The programme, scheduled to begin in April 1994, will be receiving training materials and other inputs from CDERA, the local disaster offices, and other NGOs in the region. The training of community workers is also being facilitated by the preparation of suitable manuals and other materials. One particularly useful guide book was published by ADA and is called *Community Toolbox for Disaster Preparedness*.

The training of local community personnel is expected to significantly improve the administrative and other capabilities of community organisations and allow for easier integration into national plans. Training for NGO personnel is an important requirement and opportunities for such training are being made available. Since 1988, opportunities for training have been provided by a number of regional and international agencies. Among these have been the US Office for Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA). Several NGO officers benefited from a training workshop held in 1990 as part of the International Relief Development Project (IRDP) of the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University. The project was designed to explain and promote the use of an analytical framework to facilitate and encourage the preparation of development oriented relief projects.

The framework is a diagnostic tool designed to help NGOs in the design and evaluation of relief projects and is based on the dual concepts of vulnerabilities and capacities. The view is that vulnerabilities precede disasters, contribute to their severity, impede effective disaster response and continue afterwards. It says, in essence, that people become disaster victims because they are vulnerable. NGOs have embraced this framework and have been promoting its use by community workers.

Conclusions

NGOs operate with many constraints and limited financial and human resources are the primary ones. The ability to obtain support for the implementation of disaster preparedness and management programmes as developmental activities has been difficult outside of a disaster situation. The long term nature of such programmes also creates problems. Overcoming these problems are important challenges which NGOs are prepared to face as they seek to reduce the vulnerabilities and increase the capacities of their target groups. There is much hope and encouragement in the fact that the UN has chosen to declare the 1990s as the International Decade of Natural Disaster Reduction and a number of organisations have begun to recognise that disaster preparedness and prevention are less costly alternatives to the provision of emergency relief, and carrying out rehabilitation and reconstruction programmes.