

Strengthening Disaster Preparedness in the Caribbean

October 21, 2019 By Crystal Romeo Upperman, [Gillian Marcelle](#) and [Carole Excell](#)

When disasters hit small countries, the effects on individuals, families and communities last well after the headlines fade. Natural disasters are traumatic, bringing loss of life, dislocation and violence. The devastating effects of Hurricane Dorian on the Bahamas' Grand Bahama and Abaco islands reveal a larger problem: countries with the least responsibility for climate change are often hardest hit by its impacts, and least equipped to deal with them.

Hurricane Dorian was the second strongest hurricane ever recorded in the Atlantic, with sustained winds of [more than 180 miles per hour](#). The storm parked itself over the Bahamas for almost 48 hours, causing [61 fatalities](#), destroying entire communities and causing damage totaling \$7 billion, according to preliminary estimates. [Research shows](#) that storms like this will become more damaging as temperatures warm, and that Dorian lingered so long over one place due to climate change.

Disasters are often more devastating in small island nations like the Bahamas, which have more limited resources to cope, including small populations and modest economic bases, competition for limited finances, limited pools of technical specialists and inadequate institutional measures.



Local responders distribute supplies in the Bahamas after Hurricane Dorian. Photo by Jerry Christopher Butler.

Despite these challenges, Caribbean countries are beginning to respond to intensifying climate change impacts in innovative ways. [Disaster preparedness and management agencies](#) are using better tools and improving their effectiveness in every country in the region. But Dorian has shown us that adapting to climate change also requires a concerted response from the international development community, since the scale of preparedness, relief, recovery and rebuilding efforts countries and communities need to carry out are beyond the scope of national and regional budgets.

As [recent research from the Global Commission on Adaptation lays out](#), adaptation isn't just about bracing for the impacts of climate change. Done well, it boosts economies, ensures social

equity and improves development outcomes. Investing in resilience *before* a disaster hits is more effective than relying heavily on post-disaster recovery. Protection — not simply response — saves lives. However, the post-disaster response to help countries recover is still necessary and must be sustained, since recovery can take years.

"Natural disasters are on the rise around the globe and there's a critical need for a more thoughtful approach to how we respond and help impacted communities recover," said Petra Nemcova, co-founder of All Hands and Hearts, a nonprofit that provides relief for those affected by natural disasters worldwide. "It's pressing for people from all different sectors to come together and solve seemingly intractable global problems. Collaboration for sustainable solutions needs to be our shared and urgent mission."

With that in mind, here are three ways that the Caribbean and international community can respond to more frequent and severe disasters in the region:

1. Mobilize and Guide New Avenues for Finance and International Support

Caribbean states have limited access to finance for adaptation and resilience. The Caribbean region has worked to [provide insurance and reinsurance products](#) that play a role in [providing aid following major losses](#). However, international financial markets have largely focused on the region's debt repayments rather than on building resilience ([two-thirds of Caribbean countries have debt amounting to more than 60% of their GDP](#)). There is limited private sector involvement in equity and debt markets, because these financial markets are not well developed in the Caribbean. Multilateral banks and foreign governments that host debt for Caribbean countries should accelerate their efforts to implement [debt-for-resilience swaps](#), where countries can exchange their debts for new funds that can be used for climate mitigation and adaptation. For this to work, multilateral banks and private investors need to invest in these funds.

Additionally, financial institutions in the region should create new mechanisms to support low-carbon and climate-resilience projects, coverage for people that lose housing and livelihoods, and guidance for using and collecting funds from external sources. For example, [Jamaica recently issued the first-ever Caribbean Green Bond](#) and is developing a framework for disaster risk management encompassing financial risk protection and contingent debt instruments.

2. Establish a Stronger, People-centered Regional Response



A school in Dominica rebuilt after Hurricane Maria. Photo by Tom Kucy/Clara Lionel Foundation.

All countries in the Caribbean should collaborate to develop a permanent disaster response corps that is available for rapid-response missions. They could coordinate it through CARICOM or other regional mechanisms. Currently, there is no single group with the proper training in all of the disciplines needed for disaster preparedness, recovery and response. Relief efforts frequently require the secondment of troops from national defense forces. A standing, well-trained and adequately equipped regional disaster response corps, which could involve youth national service with education and training on climate change and disaster management, would be a better option.

A dedicated disaster response corps could also shift the paradigm to holistically manage hazards, rather than merely respond to them. It is important that approaches to disaster risk management be people-centered and holistic, and include mental health and counseling services for vulnerable populations. For example, the Clara Lionel Foundation is working with International Planned Parenthood Federation and Engineers Without Borders to [make reproductive health clinics in the Caribbean more resilient to disasters](#).

3. Engage the Private Sector



Young people outside a sexual and reproductive health clinic in Belize City. Making clinics resilient to disasters should be a priority. Photo by Erika Morillo/IPPF/WHR/Clara Lionel Foundation.

All disaster preparedness and management efforts should involve private sector actors across the spectrum, ranging from large hotel chains to small businesses and entrepreneurs. Government, civil society and the private sector should map out and document available expertise and protocols for cooperation across sectors in advance of hazards and conduct regular drills. As part of such resilience efforts, companies can extend the reach of their own emergency preparedness, response and recovery activities to include employees, family members and members of the community. For example, [Airbnb has partnered with the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency \(CDEMA\)](#) to provide temporary emergency housing during disasters.

We encourage and support actors across the Caribbean to consider these ideas for collaborative efforts oriented around action and solutions. Out of the devastation and loss caused by a hurricane like Dorian, we can build long-term climate resilience throughout the region.