

Success Stories of Communities Effectively Managing Disasters: The Jamaican Experience

By Ronald Jackson
Director General (Actg.)
Office of Disaster Preparedness and Emergency Management
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INTRODUCTION

Jamaica because of its location, geology and geography, is prone to several natural hazards: bushfires, landslides, hurricanes, floods, droughts and earthquakes. These hazards when combined with situations of high vulnerability usually results in disasters of varying magnitude, intensity or level.

The toll of Natural and Man-Made Disasters on Communities over the past twenty-five years have been quite significant economically, socially, and environmentally resulting in billions of Jamaican dollars in losses, both directly and indirectly. The most recent landmark hazard impact, caused by Hurricane Ivan, resulted in losses of over J\$40 billion (8% of GDP) and 17 deaths with 32,000 persons displaced [Gilbert: 65% of GDP, 810,000 displaced and 49 deaths]

Since natural hazards are a part of our everyday life and affect the social, economic and environmental lives of communities, it is therefore imperative that the strategic policies aimed at reducing vulnerability and reducing risk be targeted at building resilient communities. The community involvement and engagement must be the underpinning philosophy of any thrust towards a national risk reduction program.

In the decades prior to the nineties (90's) government policies and fiscal allocations were geared more towards the back end activities of the risk management cycle. Risk reduction activities were implemented on an adhoc basis without any form of consistency or framework. These interventions, though quite useful, were mainly few and far between and, in instances, the product of projects supported by Regional and International Donor Agencies. These risk reduction activities were nationally driven, unsustainable and did not at all seem to significantly reduce the vulnerability of local communities.

This approach remained a consistent feature of the national government policy in the nineteen nineties and the beginning of the 21st century, and it was clear that their was a significant paradigm shift driven by the international donor partners and the conditional requirements of their project or grant funds, but in the context of Jamaica, more so by the consistent focus of the National Disaster Office to illustrate through its programs that the community was a critical partner in the development process and therefore, would be critical partners in the risk reduction process.

Though seemingly fleeting, Local Government Reform does place the community at the center of the decision and development process. We have seen that some of the most effective risk reduction initiatives have involved, in a significant way, communities which have been able to understand the risk and vulnerability and have designed appropriate plans to address these issues. Through the establishment of community based disaster management programmes we have been able to transform vulnerable communities into resilient ones.

It has been proven that given the resources, the knowledge and skills persons within their local community setting have been able to identify and prioritize the hazards and take the necessary steps to minimize their impact.

This paper will seek to illustrate these successes and the methodologies utilized in the interventions in communities in Kellits (Clarendon), The Rio Grande Valley (Portland), Fort George (St. Mary), Inner City Communities such as Majesty Gardens and Sub-Urban Communities such as Mamee River and the work done by the Red Cross CDRT programme in communities of St. Thomas which have served to enhanced the capacity of persons and by extension their communities capacity to effectively manage hazards and where necessary, disasters.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Office of Disaster Preparedness since the mid 1980's, around 5 years after its creation, realized the need to make a radical shift in the conceptual framework in the management of hazards. The focus has been more towards reducing community vulnerability while at the same time ensuring that the requisite capacities still exists to carry out humanitarian response as after all we can only cope with, and not eliminate disasters. In realizing that greater emphasis needed to be placed on the people who would be directly affected by the hazards they faced, the organization set about the process of establishing community disaster management structures, programs and projects aimed at strengthening the communities capacity to minimize there risk and survive for at least 72 hours post impact. Having accepted that Disaster Prevention and Mitigation actions required community acceptance and initiative, the programmes initially sought to provide communities with the ability to manage local interventions in preparedness and response. It was further accepted that communities are generally knowledgeable about their own environments and coping mechanisms and ways to reduce vulnerabilities. The community would therefore become self reliant and needed only National, Regional and International efforts to support them. Community Disaster Management Planning has now evolved to include hazard identification, vulnerability assessments and hazard mitigation activities.

Some of the notable interventions include training in shelter management, first aid and hazard mapping; establishment of community flood warning systems and flood teams; tangible demonstration and actual mitigation projects.

This capacity building process was established within the structure of the National Disaster Management Mechanism. The Mechanism functions at (3) three levels:

- National Level
- Parish Level
- Community Level

The Parish Level mirrors the National Level to some extent; however, the policy level decisions and activities related to public awareness, prevention and response are guided by the Local Government System.

This model of Disaster Management could be viewed as “Comprehensive” in design and principle, as it sought to develop an integrated management of all hazards especially in light of the fact that one or more agency had a role to play in the process. It also sought to integrate disaster management as vital part of community development planning.

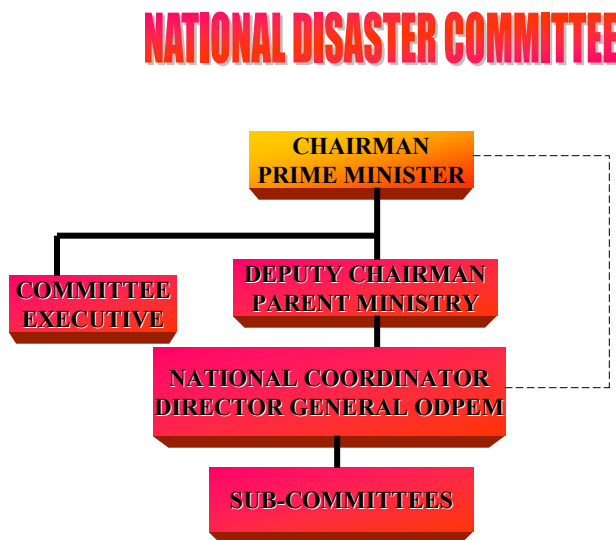
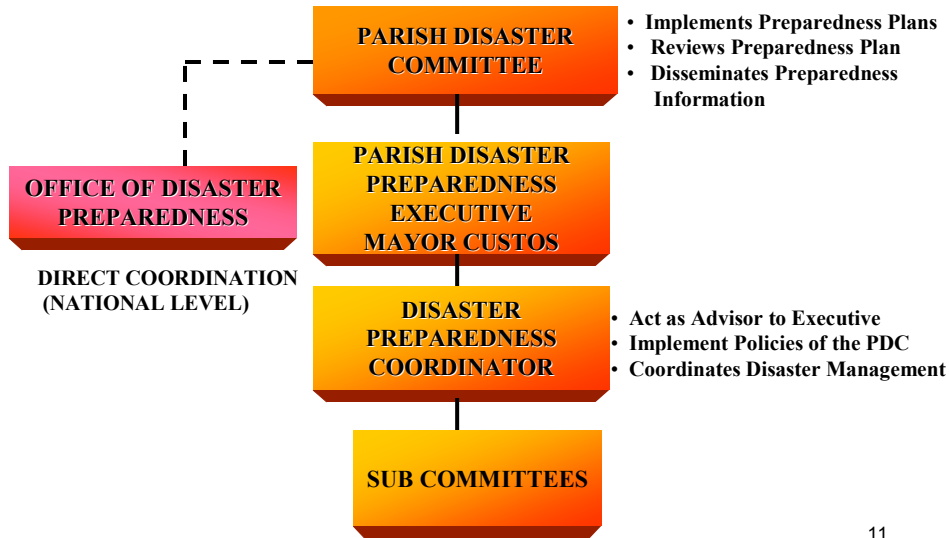


Figure 1: National Disaster Management Structure



PARISH DISASTER COMMITTEE

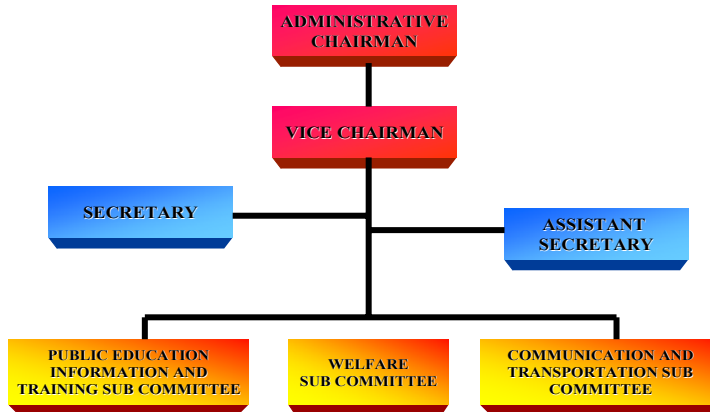


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Figure 2: Parish Disaster Management Committees



ZONAL COMMITTEES



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Figure 3: The Community Disaster Management Structure

At present there are over 120 community disaster management committees across the length and breadth of Jamaica. Zonal Committees were initially established by the ODPEM and Administered by Parish Coordinators and the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA). This involved identifying communities that had similar characteristics within immediate spheres of influence of a growth center and bringing them together to administer to their disaster management needs. This approach has seen numerous successes as well as numerous challenges over the years.

THE SUCCESS STORIES

The United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction (UN/ISDR) postulates that a community which invents its own ideas and work programmes to address their individual needs has a better chance of finding long term solutions to its problems. Our experience has shown that by identifying resources within a community and among its members projects have been implemented at far less costs than government directed approach.

Through the International Donor support we have been able to implement projects aimed at strengthening community and National capacity to identify, mitigate and respond to Natural Hazards. The following are significant projects implemented to date:

- 1991 the Rio Cobre Automated and Community Flood Warning System was implemented to provide Early Warning Information Nationally and to support the evacuation and emergency management planning of the communities of Thompson Pen and Rivoli in St. Catherine. It involved the setting up stream and river gauges (telemetered) and a flood warning plan
- Community Vulnerability Reduction Programme funded by the European Union, the programme includes:
 - ✓ Establish flood alert and flood warning system
 - ✓ Flood plain mapping
 - ✓ Strengthening of the community zonal system
 - ✓ Community training for the project area and landslide mapping
- Vulnerability reduction Programme for Pedro, St. Ann activities included:
 - ✓ Cleaning of sinkholes
 - ✓ Community training in Basic Disaster management
- 1998 Rio Grande Valley activities included:
 - ✓ The establishment of a network of rain and river gauges to improve data collection and management in the valley
 - ✓ A community-based and alert system for flooding for the communities in the Rio Grande Valley

- ✓ Establishment of a community disaster management committee to monitor and utilize the early warning system in the Rio Grande Valley
 - ✓ Training of the community in the use of the system, hazard and vulnerability maps, environment management and disaster management
- Portmore Evacuation Plan - Partnership between the Portmore Community and the Disaster Office aimed at moving the citizens in the community to safety either into emergency shelters or out to family members and friends located at higher ground.
- 2000 – 2001 European Union DIPECHO Project: Loss reduction and disaster management strengthening at the community level to build disaster management capacity in the high risk communities in August town, Gordon Town/Mavis Bank and Harbour View/ Rockfort in Kingston and St. Andrew. Activities include vulnerability mapping, surveys, training, and implementation of small mitigation sub-projects.
- 2002 - The project USAID/OFDA, implement a disaster mitigation programme aimed at minimizing the impact of flooding in Fort George, St. Mary. Through the promotion and implementation of a disaster mitigation plan and the implementation of a Community Flood Early Warning Systems and flood alert data network along with the establishment of a Community Flood Response Team.
- 2002 - UNDP/GOJ support to community based disaster management (UNDP) 3 year community based initiative. Aim to strengthen capacities at the national and community level to conduct vulnerability programmes in selected flood-prone communities in the parishes of St. James, St. Ann and Clarendon. Landslide mapping in St. Mary

COMMUNITIES MOBILIZED TOWARDS REDUCING THEIR VULNERABILITY

Majesty Gardens

This community in South St. Andrew is an example of persons coming together, identify and prioritizing a hazard that needed their immediate attention. They identified a major drainage way (a gully) in their community which posed a major threat to the community while filled with garbage. They managed to establish a committee and have been successful in getting it cleaned with plans to conduct fundraising activities to construct additional barriers to prevent flooding.

Portland and St. Mary

Following the passage of Hurricane Michelle October 29 to November 5, 2001 volunteers in the parishes of Portland and St. Mary along with churches and service organizations provided clothing, food and assisted in the removal of debris from the homes of affected communities. Zonal Committees in Portland such as Buff Bay, Fruitful Vale and Swift River have run the emergency shelters housing their neighbours, they identified resources internally and mobilized themselves without initial outside help.

Kellits, Clarendon

This community programme initially established and organized by the ODPEM has recorded tremendous success. Nestled in the hills of North Clarendon, the Kellits Zonal Committee has gone beyond solely responding to disasters but has also undertaken major activities aimed at building the awareness and knowledge base of their community members through the implementation of annual community fairs and street meetings. They have fully embraced the concept and have remained sustainable throughout the years.

Cedar Valley and Yallahs in St. Thomas

The Jamaica Red Cross along with support of the ODPEM and the Social Development Commission established Community Disaster Response teams in the communities of Yallahs and Cedar valley. These volunteers went from street to street issuing warnings in the wake of Hurricane Ivan in 2004. They had established their community high risk maps and knew exactly where the vulnerable people within their community lived and was called upon to evacuate the blind and disabled.

“We look for the most indigent, most vulnerable, those who do not have anybody,” says Joshua Davis.....World Disasters Report 2005

There were teams that were sent to watch the rivers for signs of flooding and dispatched others to issue warnings, a significant feature of our communities with Flood Early Warning Systems.

These actions helped to ensure that the death tolls and injury levels were low.

CHALLENGES

Despite all these success there have been significant challenges in getting to this point. The community disaster management programme has not been as far reaching as we would have wanted. For every new Community Disaster Management Committee formed others become dormant or are having to be revitalized. Our experience has suggested that the factors such as the harsh economic environment have switched the focus of community persons away from voluntarism and more towards trying to seek out a living. The economic situation has also resulted in limited budget support for National Disaster Agency hence, programme activities geared towards building community capacity are limited not sustained heavily reliant on international donor projects which are not always forthcoming nor designed to address this need.

The attempt to implement Local Government Reform has been in progress for at least the last 13-14 years and to date we do not seem closer to achieving this very important mechanism of empowering the community. Local Government Reform is intended to provide a radical shift in governance to the point where the community has been given significant roles in the decision making process as it relates to the deepening of democracy and the creation of social capital. Organizations such as the Social Development Commission continues to push the agenda by engaging the citizens of communities across the country towards making them stronger parish based civil mechanisms capable of utilizing local knowledge to their sustained benefit. This framework provides an opportunity to infuse planning and disaster mitigation strategies into broader processes of national, parish and community planning. These efforts are stymied in the face of lagging local governance reform processes.

Reducing the vulnerability of Government Infrastructure

Assessments after successive years of hazard impact have revealed that communities are made more vulnerable by the high vulnerability of government infrastructure and critical facilities. Therefore the strides made by the communities in attending to their immediate community mitigation needs are often times wiped out by the weak and vulnerable nature of government infrastructure both physical and social. Hence communities find themselves either cut off from the communication and transportation sources even after they have managed to survive the onslaught of hazardous events for seventy two hours.

CONCLUSION

While there have been numerous successes in placing the community as the focal point within the drive to establish strong risk reduction programmes nationally there are still numerous challenges to overcome. The issue of ownership of the process and the sustainability of community actions are still major hurdles to “jump”. The organization has been engaged in a process towards learning from its past approaches to improve its future interventions.

The lessons from Hurricane Ivan have suggested that the approach of seeking to build resilient communities is so far the right approach. This has continued to be a feature of the ODPEM is annual work programme activities. The National Mitigation Policy has also been developed with the local community as its philosophical underpinnings.