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DISASTER REDUCTION OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

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DISASTER REDUCTION OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

At the Summit of the Americas for Sustainable Development in Bolivia in 1996, the heads of state and government agreed to “Promote the inclusion of . . . disaster planning, preparedness, and mitigation in national development plans; seek to establish, as appropriate, regional emergency response teams and regularly test contingency plans; and promote the establishment of appropriate building construction codes that include regulatory and enforcement mechanisms through the sharing of technical information and expertise” (Initiative 6). The Plan of Action also calls for promoting "the exchange of information and experiences among the mayors of the Hemisphere on the most appropriate practices for urban environmental stewardship," including sustainable transportation (Initiative 43), of which natural hazards are a prominent aspect; fostering "mechanisms for evaluating the environmental impact" (Initiative 45), of which vulnerability assessments are of ever-increasing importance to national development; and cooperating in the strengthening and implementation of regional disaster mitigation plans (Initiative 57).

To support the member states in the implementation of these initiatives, the OAS has developed a strategy that:

- Recognizes the existence of the broadest hemispheric development themes of strengthening democracy, trade, and sustainable development;
- Supports policy, strategic action, and development cooperation activities of the member states;
- Focuses on support to specific sectors including agriculture, education, energy, tourism, transportation, and urban lifelines. Not only must the sectors better prepare themselves for, and respond to, disasters caused by natural hazard events, but they also must reduce the vulnerability of their infrastructure to avoid losses in the future.
- Uses planning units such as watersheds, trade corridors, and subregions comprising several countries, as well as the hemisphere as a whole.

Objectives

Much of this support builds on activities initiated before the Bolivia Summit, which were based on member states’ growing concern over the death and destruction from natural disasters. Following the Bolivia mandates, the OAS intensified its efforts to strengthen the member states’ ability to implement the initiatives dealing with disasters in the Bolivia Action Plan. This effort has as its objective the reduction of the impact of disasters and better preparedness for responding to the needs created by disasters by establishing mechanisms through which the member states can:

- Make the most efficient use of scarce resources,
- Exchange experiences and expertise on a continuing basis,
- Capture external resources to complement national and regional activities, and
- Directly affect mainstream development planning, investment, and implementation actions.

To meet these objectives, the following activities are under way.

1. Inter-American Committee for Natural Disaster Reduction

The OAS is beginning a series of activities in support of resolution of AG/RES. 1682, which created the Inter-American Committee for Natural Disaster Reduction. This support will include drafting material to facilitate the Committee's operations, organizing technical meetings and preparing documents for Committee discussion, reviewing documentation submitted by Committee members to facilitate discussion; and preparing draft material for Committee consideration as it advises the OAS Permanent Council on collective actions to lessen vulnerability to natural hazards and to strengthen policies on emergency preparedness and response.

2. Inter-American Dialogue on Disaster Reduction

At the general policy and strategic action level, the OAS, with support from the World Bank (host of the second meeting), UNDP, the Latin America Network of Social Studies in Disaster Prevention in Latin America (La Red), and PAHO, created the Inter-American Dialogue on Disaster Reduction. The Dialogue is an open forum with the participation of individuals from the public sector, NGOs, private businesses, academia, research centers, and international development assistance organizations. The agenda for its discussions is set on the basis of critical and emerging issues affecting the reduction of vulnerability of populations and their economic and social infrastructure to natural hazards. Policy and strategic action proposals are prepared and discussed for action by appropriate hemispheric, regional, and national bodies, including the Interagency Task Force on Bolivia Summit follow-up.

3. Caribbean Disaster Mitigation Project (CDMP)

The OAS is the specialized implementing agency of the Caribbean Disaster Mitigation Project (CDMP), which is funded by the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance of USAID. The objectives of the project, which began in 1993, are:

- To promote sustainable development by reducing the vulnerability to natural hazards in existing and planned development;
- To improve public awareness and development decision-making by accurately mapping hazard-prone areas;
- To improve hazard risk management by the insurance industry and help maintain adequate catastrophic protection for the region; and
- To promote community-based disaster preparedness and prevention activities with support from the private sector.

CDMP carries out pilot activities in selected Caribbean countries and shares these experiences through regional training and information dissemination. The six main activities are:

- The facilitation of community-based disaster preparedness and prevention in the Dominican Republic

and Haiti;

- Natural hazard assessments and risk mapping for areas at great risk such as Montego Bay and the Kingston metropolitan area in Jamaica; Belize; and coastal areas throughout the Eastern Caribbean;
- The promotion of hazard-resistant building practices and standards for housing and small public buildings, in conjunction with the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States;
- Vulnerability and risk audits to reduce losses in lifelines and critical facilities, including electrical utilities, schools, and tourism infrastructure;
- The promotion of loss reduction incentives and hazard mitigation in the property insurance industry; and
- Technical training and information transfer, including new hurricane impact models installed at the Caribbean Institute for Meteorology and Hydrology and the Planning Institute of Jamaica.

4. Caribbean: Planning for Adaptation to Climate Change (CPACC)

The OAS is the executing agency for a four-year project funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) to support Caribbean countries in preparing to cope with the adverse affects of global climate change, particularly sea-level rise in coastal areas. The CPACC focuses on vulnerability assessments, adaptation planning, and capacity building. Although climate change introduces a long-term outlook, the improved understanding of the physical phenomena that affect the coast are useful in helping the countries to prepare for the possible impact of hazardous natural events with shorter return periods such as hurricanes and storm surges by assessing the vulnerability of coastal economic and social infrastructure.

5. Transportation Sector

Mainstreaming disaster reduction in national development is the underlying priority of the Bolivia Summit initiatives dealing with disaster reduction. To that end, policies, strategic actions and development cooperation are being developed to guide the sector through the following initiatives:

The Hemispheric Plan for Environmental Management Guidance for Road Transportation Corridors has been drafted to support the member states' implementation of trade agreements and to address problems of vulnerability in the national transportation sector. This plan is a guide to environmental management for the design and implementation of road corridors, including aspects of natural hazard vulnerability reduction, emergency preparedness, and disaster response. The plan is being developed in conjunction with the Latin America Society of Road Transportation Environmental Units (SLUAV) with support from the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the Andean Development Corporation (CAF), the U.S. Department of Transportation, the Pan American Highway Institute, and private-sector specialists. Member states will use this plan as the technical basis for formulating and negotiating common policies, programs, and actions. The final draft version of the plan will be discussed at the Fourth Meeting of SLUAV, scheduled to take place in Bolivia in 2000.

To complement its support in the policy and strategic action area, the OAS is serving as international technical coordinator and adviser for technical studies on the vulnerability of road transportation corridors.

The purpose of these studies is to identify on a priority basis vulnerable segments of road systems and propose mitigation measures. Pilot studies, which include training, have been carried out in Argentina and Brazil with FEMCIDI support, and a Central America study is programmed for 1999-2000 with U.S. Department of Transportation support, in coordination with CEPREDENAC, COCATRAN, and SIECA. The Central America study will complement a study of the Central America Highway System now under way. The OAS and CAF are developing a similar study approach for the Andean countries. The technical tools and experiences used in these studies include methodologies and training courses developed previously by the OAS through its pilot program in road corridor vulnerability reduction, which was supported by the European Commission Humanitarian Office (ECHO).

Research and training are also important components of the support to member states in the transportation sector. The OAS has formed and is serving as international advisor to a new consortium of university research and training centers, PROCORREDOR, in Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, and the U.S. Each center brings to the consortium its own network of private and public institutions involved in the production, processing, and marketing of trade goods, with particular emphasis on the transportation, agriculture, and energy sectors. The project is intended to develop methods and case studies to analyze trade corridor development, focusing on environmental management issues including vulnerability to natural hazards. Financial support from the U.S. – CIDI Specific Fund supplements the majority funding from the consortium participants.

In support of the Western Hemisphere Transportation Initiative (WHTI), organized by the ministers of transportation, the OAS is collaborating with the U.S. Department of Transportation in the drafting of a hemispheric plan for reciprocal response to emergencies and disaster reduction in the transportation sector. This plan will complement and draw from ongoing work of the Inter-American Ports Committee, supported by FEMCIDI, in projects carried out by the U.S. Department of Transportation, in response to requests to the committee from Honduras and Nicaragua following Hurricane Mitch for assistance in lessening vulnerability to natural hazards. Guatemala is coordinating technical actions with support from the U.S. Department of Transportation.

In addition, the OAS is developing the basic support for a hemispheric conference on trade corridor vulnerability reduction, focusing on the transportation, energy, and agriculture sectors, for the year 2000.

6. Education Sector

Since 1993 the OAS has undertaken a series of national, regional, and hemispheric activities, including the preparation of the Hemispheric Plan for Disaster Reduction of the Education Sector. To that end, the OAS is supporting institutions in several member states that serve as technical secretariats for the development and implementation of the plan in one or more of its thematic areas: physical infrastructure, academic aspects, and public participation. A technical secretariat for general coordination (Peru) and a technical secretariat for physical infrastructure and for coordination of the Second Hemispheric Conference on Disaster Reduction in the Education Sector (Venezuela) are already in place. These actions follow regional conferences for Latin America (Venezuela, 1992) and the Caribbean (Trinidad and Tobago,

1993), the First Hemispheric Conference in Venezuela in 1997, and a virtual hemispheric conference in 1998.

The OAS has supported the preparation of national plans for the reduction of vulnerability in the education sector in all Central American countries and some of those in the Caribbean (Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, St. Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia and St. Vincent and the Grenadines), with support from ECHO.

Together with the IDB, the OAS is planning to host a regional meeting in Central America later this year to study the present status and the need for future actions related to school reconstruction in that region, in collaboration with CECC and CEPREDENAC. In addition, the OAS continues to seek external support to assist individual countries in updating and implementing national vulnerability reduction plans through increased training, technology transfer, and development cooperation.

7. Small Valley Flood Alert and Vulnerability Reduction in Central America

The OAS is supporting the design and development of community-based flood alert and vulnerability reduction activities in small valleys in Central America. This program has been supported by ECHO and is in coordination with CEPREDENAC, the Central American Water Resources Commission (CCRH), and the Federation of Municipalities of the Central American Isthmus (FEMICA), has carried out pilot activities in each country. In the two valleys in Honduras where the program was implemented before Hurricane Mitch, the Government of Honduras has reported that no deaths due to drowning or landslides were reported following the hurricane. Additional support is being sought to expand the program in dozens of small valleys throughout the region in collaboration with CEPREDENAC and the Disaster Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Programme of UNDP, as well as NGOs and bilateral assistance as part of the Hurricane Mitch reconstruction efforts.