

HUD'S POST-DISASTER RECONSTRUCTION IN COSTA RICA

Project Overview

In the fall of 1998, hurricanes Georges and Mitch battered Central America and the Caribbean, causing unprecedented damage. USAID transferred to HUD \$10 million as part of a \$621 million assistance bill. HUD used its expertise in housing and community redevelopment to rebuild communities in the region and help them become better able to resist the forces of natural disasters. All of the appropriated money was spent by January 31, 2002, including \$225,000 for Costa Rica.

HUD's innovative program has been well received by local officials and communities; provided model projects in land use planning, disaster preparedness, housing construction training and housing finance; illustrated the critical importance of housing and land use planning in any effective reconstruction program; and highlighted how new and creative partnerships between the federal government and private technical expertise can contribute to the effectiveness of American intervention abroad for post-disaster recovery.

Costa Rica

Costa Rica was not impacted physically by hurricane Mitch. However, the hurricane increased significantly the number of Nicaraguan residents migrating to Costa Rica, putting great stress on the border communities and the capital city of San Jose. Approximately 315,000 Nicaraguans lived in Costa Rica in 2000, according to the census. After Hurricane Mitch, an estimated 200,000 Nicaraguans lived in the border region, creating an economically depressed area. The northern border region consists of approximately 4,691 square miles of viable land, limited urban population and a large labor supply. Yet, mixed amongst fruit plantations and other agricultural industries are squatter homes often built with plastic and/or cardboard. These makeshift homes have no plumbing, electricity, running water or sanitary facilities.

HUD worked with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to help local border governments of Costa Rica create more viable alternatives for the border communities, ultimately helping the migrants and municipal governments that otherwise would have faced an unsupervised inundation of migrants to Costa Rican cities.

The IOM first identified the resources of the communities that the Costa Rican government could use to enhance the economic base of the border. The IOM organized the border communities, working intensively with the Co-Federation of Border Municipalities to conduct joint analysis of five communities – La Cruz, Los Chiles, Upala, San Carlos, and Sarapiquí. The studies, done in participation with the municipalities and the local community groups, identified the communities' needs and strengths, so that they are now better able to sustain the development of the communities. Some of the top priorities include building the tourism industry through micro-enterprises development for tourism and river transportation in the beach communities, and specializing in handicrafts and fishery.

For example, the studies found that many women in the region had manual sewing machines and were adept at making clothes. The studies suggested that the women organize into a collective, where the women could perfect their craft through training. They then could sew uniforms to be sold to the local agribusinesses. This increase in income would greatly enhance the women's quality of life. Although not yet undertaken, this idea and many others could turn around the depressed northern border region.