

OFFICE OF U.S. FOREIGN DISASTER ASSISTANCE (USAID/OFDA)

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Ecuador's Emergency Management System Becomes a Shining Example for the LAC Region

Three years after a devastating earthquake struck the northern coast of Ecuador, the country's national emergency management system has become an outstanding example for the Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) region and the world.

Recently, the Organization of American States (OAS) recognized the 911 Integrated Security Service of Ecuador (ECU911)—whose timely and efficient work saved lives and helped affected populations during the April 2016 earthquake—for the system's capacity to integrate national response agencies, state-of-the-art technology, and emergency prevention efforts. In late 2018, OAS announced that it would use ECU911 as a model to promote emergency management protocols throughout the LAC region.

As a longtime partner in ECU911's training and capacity-building programs, USAID/OFDA is pleased to congratulate Ecuador on this significant international achievement.

Michael Camchong, USAID/OFDA's Disaster Risk Management Specialist (DRMS), who has provided technical assistance to emergency services professionals in Ecuador through USAID/OFDA's Regional Disaster Assistance Program (RDAP) for more than six years, commented, "I congratulate ECU911 for becoming an emergency management reference for the entire region. It has been a pleasure to support an organization that takes ownership of each small technical input, adapts it to their needs, and improves it exponentially."

Ecuador's Risk Management Secretary Maria Alexandra Ocles remarked, "For Ecuador, it has been a significant challenge to establish a system that integrates different response agencies, including the police, military, and fire corps. The lessons learned during the 2016 earthquake response helped us improve the country's emergency response system in many



Carlos Cevallos (left), a USAID/OFDA-trained USAR leader reunites with Pablo Córdoba (right), whom Carlos's team, UREM, rescued under the rubble. Carlos commented that RDAP's training helped his team rapidly and effectively conduct life-saving efforts immediately following the 2016 earthquake. Photo by Irene Gago, USAID/OFDA

ways. From updating our response plans and emergency operations center manuals to creating inclusive disaster risk management guidelines, the experience helped bolster our disaster response capacities."

Juan Marco Figalio, the Samborondón Zone Coordinator for ECU 911, thanked USAID/OFDA for the capacity-building support throughout the years and noted, "We experienced an earthquake that, had we not been prepared by USAID/OFDA, the number of victims could have been greater. The training and technical assistance we received from USAID/OFDA throughout the years helped us in all our rescue operations, as well as in damage and needs assessments, among other activities. The implementation of the Incident Command System [ICS], which USAID/OFDA helped us incorporate into our emergency management model, was crucial during the earthquake response. It enabled first response entities to use a common language and optimize available resources. One of the first rescue teams to arrive at the disaster zone and save lives was the Medical Emergency and Rescue Unit of the Ecuadorian Traffic Commission [UREM], who had been trained by the RDAP program."

Since 1989, USAID/OFDA has provided training and specialized advisory services to multiple national emergency and risk management offices in Ecuador through RDAP's team of technical experts in areas such as urban search-and-rescue (USAR), ICS, emergency operations center management, and forest fire control and prevention. Many of the USAID/OFDA-trained individuals have assumed leadership roles and continue to conduct training using local resources.

In 2012, a group of nearly 50 ECU 911 staff members completed several RDAP courses, including the ICS, Damage Assessment and Needs Analysis, and the Emergency Operations Center Management Course.

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USAID/OFDA DRMS Camchong meets with Ecuador's Risk Management Secretary Maria Alexandra Ocles. Photo by Irene Gago, USAID/OFDA

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Currently, ECU 911 uses the RDAP training portfolio courses to further advise approximately 5,000 first responders in Ecuador each year.

“For years, USAID/OFDA DRMS Camchong has assisted Ecuador’s National Risk Management Secretariat [SNGRE] in most areas. Early this year, he provided us information management technical assistance, which helped us significantly improve our situation reports and communicate more effectively with national authorities, the media, and populations,” said Guayaquil SNGRE Monitoring Director Virgilio Benavides.

“Ecuador was the first country in Latin America to achieve a national accreditation system for USAR teams, and USAID/OFDA helped us develop this accreditation system,” Benavides added.

“We aim to continue supporting Ecuador’s risk management system and first response agencies through the delivery of courses and technical assistance,” said USAID/OFDA Senior Regional Advisor Tim Callaghan.

Each year, USAID/OFDA supports an average of 10 capacity-building events in Ecuador. In 2018, RDAP provided technical assistance, equipment, and tools to the SNGRE for the planning, organization, and implementation of Ecuador’s first national USAR mobilization exercise, which was built around an earthquake scenario with real-time response in Manabí Province’s Portoviejo city. In addition, in 2017, a team of ECU 911 emergency management specialists participated in the USAID/OFDA-funded Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) in the Americas study tour at Florida International University in Miami to learn about innovative DRR and disaster risk management practices from Florida’s emergency response agencies.



Quito SNGRE Monitoring Director Mariana Quispilo (right) shows USAID/OFDA DRMS Camchong how his technical guidance helped SNGRE improve situation reports and communication with national authorities, media, and populations. Photo by Irene Gago, USAID/OFDA

Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance
Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

Tel: +(506) 2290-4133
Email: ofdalac@ofda.gov
Internet: www.usaid.gov



In late June, USAID/OFDA, through RDAP, supported Ecuador’s MOE and Quito’s Fire Corps in the design and development of a one-week training on WUI fire prevention and control tools. Photo courtesy of Quito Fire Corps

USAID/OFDA Supports Wildland–Urban Interface Fire Prevention in Ecuador

In late June, USAID/OFDA, in coordination with Ecuador’s Ministry of Environment (MOE) Amazonia Without Fires Program Unit and Quito Fire Corps, developed a workshop entitled, “Tools for the Prevention and Control of Wildland–Urban Interface Forest Fires” in Ecuador’s capital city of Quito.

The workshop, which took place from June 24–28 at Quito Fire Corps’s training center, brought together nearly 40 representatives from Colombian and Ecuadorian risk management, first response, and environmental protection institutions. The event’s objective was to provide knowledge and tools for actors to plan joint strategies and actions for fire risk mitigation in the wildland–urban interface (WUI), a transitional zone between urban development and unoccupied rural land characterized by increased fire risk.

“Latin America needs to prepare for this new typology of forest fires that have increased in frequency and intensity and are threatening hundreds of communities. It is important to identify vulnerable communities located in the WUI and help them become aware of their main risks and prevention practices,” said Luisa Alfaro, USAID/OFDA DRMS for Comprehensive Fire Management.

“To cope with this new type of fire [risk], it is crucial to create interdisciplinary groups that

can jointly design, plan, and implement strategies for its prevention and control. This training has enabled the creation of working teams who plan to work together towards this common goal,” added DRMS Alfaro.

“This training has facilitated coordination among local response actors, government agencies, and communities for the prevention and control of fires in the WUI,” said DRMS Michael Camchong who, with DRMS Alfaro, assisted with the course design and development.

“The course was more operational than theoretical. During the training, participants developed a map where they identified the different WUI risk zones. This map will help plan risk mitigation action, and, in case of an impending fire, it could also help plan response actions,” said Andrea Bustos, MOE Amazonia Without Fires Program Unit’s Coordinator.

“It is the first course of its kind to be held in Ecuador and Latin America, so it has been a pilot that we intend to replicate throughout the region,” added Bustos.

For over 20 years, USAID/OFDA has worked closely with LAC countries, providing specialized technical assistance to protect regional populations, strengthen integrated fire management, and improve community response and preparation capacity.