

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

REGIONAL OFFICE FOR LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN, SAN JOSÉ, COSTA RICA

Promoting Greater Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Disaster Management

Imagine being blind and unable to locate the emergency exit... deaf and unable to hear the tsunami evacuation sirens... confined to a wheelchair, staring at the stairs leading to the shelter.

For the approximately 3 million men, women, and children living with disabilities in Central America, disasters present particular challenges. These individuals face a significantly higher risk of injury, death, abuse, and exploitation during disasters than the rest of the population. Until recently, no specific policies and procedures related to disability existed that could be widely adopted by Central American government institutions and organizations working in disaster management.

Now, thanks to a recent UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) project supported by USAID/OFDA, advocacy groups representing persons with disabilities are coordinating with disaster risk management institutions from the governments of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama, along with the Central American Coordination Center for the Prevention of Natural Disasters (CEPREDENAC), to strengthen the participation and protection of persons with disabilities in disaster risk reduction and response policy and practice.

In late 2015 and early 2016, the project successfully developed standards that promote greater inclusion, protection, and care of persons with disabilities in emergencies and disasters. More than 600 people, including individuals with disabilities, disaster specialists, and representatives from academia, advocacy groups, public institutions, and other civil society organizations, provided input during the process. In February 2016, CEPREDENAC's Council of Representatives endorsed and adopted the standards as a regional reference tool to guide Central American countries in their efforts to assist persons with disabilities during emergencies and disasters.



Using the slogan "Nothing About Us, Without Us," the project was an exercise in inclusion, ensuring people with a wide range of sensory, motor, and psychosocial disabilities participated in the process, particularly the development of social media, radio, and television content. *Photo courtesy of UNICEF*

The endorsement paved the way for countries to begin operationalizing the standards. In June 2016, Costa Rica's National Commission for Risk Prevention and Disaster Response (CNE) signed a cooperation agreement with the National Council for Persons with Disabilities (CONAPDIS), providing a strategic framework to incorporate disability concerns into the risk management agenda and implement the guidelines provided by the standards. In November, when thousands of at-risk families were evacuated to temporary shelters as the Category 2 Hurricane Otto approached Costa Rica, CNE announced it was working closely with CONAPDIS to ensure the safety and security of people with disabilities during the emergency.

The UNICEF project achieved other successes as well, mobilizing organizations and groups of people with disabilities to help construct public awareness messaging and communications materials highlighting the newly adopted regional standards. Dozens of people with physical and mental disabilities from throughout Central America, participated in a workshop in Costa Rica in June 2016 to help produce media-friendly versions of the standards.

Participants also shared their personal stories and experiences dealing with disasters, for inclusion in social media, radio, and television campaigns advocating for the inclusion of people with disabilities in all stages of emergency preparedness and response.

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In June 2016, dozens of people with disabilities participated in a workshop to help construct materials of a public awareness campaign highlighting newly adopted disaster management standards, which promote a greater inclusion and protection of persons with disabilities in emergency preparedness efforts. *Photo courtesy of UNICEF*

Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities continued from page 1

Campaign messages aimed to increase public awareness of the following 13 norms developed by the USAID/OFDA project to guide emergency assistance to people with disabilities:

1. **Inclusion:** Participatory inclusion of persons with disabilities in decision-making processes.
2. **Accessibility:** Inclusive environments, services, products, communication, and information.
3. **Capacity-building:** Staff training and awareness raising on the needs of persons with disabilities.
4. **Communication:** Inclusive communication and advocacy.
5. **Monitoring:** Inclusive monitoring and information gathering.
6. **Community:** Community-based mechanisms and participation.
7. **Security:** Safe environments free of violence and exploitation.
8. **Companionship:** Psychosocial support following disasters.
9. **Support networks:** Restoration and strengthening of support networks.
10. **Health:** Access to medical and health services.
11. **Education:** Continuity of inclusive educational services.
12. **Water:** Access to water, sanitation, and hygiene services.
13. **Relief commodities:** Equitable access to humanitarian assistance.



Project participants living with disabilities contributed to the public awareness campaign by sharing their life experiences and personal testimonies, ensuring appropriate and effective messaging to promote the rights of persons with disabilities during disaster situations. *Photo courtesy of UNICEF*

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To raise awareness of the unique needs of persons with disabilities during disasters, IDDI held dozens of meetings with community leaders, emergency officials, and advocacy groups. *Photo courtesy of IDDI*

Dominican Republic DRR Project Focuses on People with Disabilities

As part of its commitment to help protect vulnerable populations during disasters, USAID/OFDA supported the Dominican Integral Development Institute (IDDI) to promote disaster risk reduction (DRR) for people with disabilities in the Dominican Republic.

With approximately \$150,000 in USAID/OFDA funding, IDDI helped reduce the vulnerability of persons with disabilities in disaster situations, through community-based preparedness and mitigation activities, promotion of self-protection measures, and increased coordination and emergency response capabilities among different community groups.

To build awareness of the unique needs of persons with disabilities during disasters, IDDI worked with 16 communities in the lower watershed of the Ozama-Isabela River, Santo Domingo Province, that are highly vulnerable to hydrometeorological hazards, including flooding and landslides. The DRR project also strengthened coordination among advocacy groups for individuals with disabilities and local and municipal organizations within the Dominican Republic's National System of Disaster Risk Management.

Additionally, the project helped to improve and adapt early warning systems, community evacuation routes, and emergency shelter facilities to more

effectively meet the needs of persons with disabilities. To facilitate rapid response and ensure communities are adequately equipped to meet a variety of different needs during a disaster, IDDI provided training, tools, and equipment to the 16 community emergency committees, including wheelchairs, walkers, canes, crutches, stretchers, megaphones, two-way radios, emergency lanterns, and first aid supplies.

The community leaders were highly appreciative of the project, according to IDDI project directors, who reported a better understanding of the tools and knowledge needed to care for their most vulnerable neighbors and family members.



Individuals with disabilities have a disproportionately higher risk of injury during an emergency. *Photo by Irene Gago, USAID/OFDA*