

Emergency Preparedness in the Caribbean and Central America

October 2007

Since our arrival in Central America in 1974, Save the Children UK has contributed to the construction of a rights based framework, which has led to dramatic changes in the lives of children and young people.

This case study highlights our work in the Caribbean and Central America over the last five years and the changes we have inspired, and is a record of the lessons we have learned, the challenges we have identified and the recommendations we have for all those involved in development work and the defence of human rights, especially the rights of children.

Since the closure of our programme in the Caribbean and Central American (CARICA) in March 2007, the legacy of our work for children continues through the ongoing work of our dedicated partners throughout the region. This particular study focuses on emergency preparedness in the Caribbean and Central America.

The programme

The Emergency Preparedness programme supported the development of institutional capacities of local partners and alliance members in the prevention, preparation for and response to emergencies. Our trainings emphasized the need to protect children during emergency situations, and provided tools for doing so.

Why we did it

Helping children and their families in times of emergency or disaster is part of the international mandate of Save the Children UK. We began operations in the Central America and Caribbean (CARICA) region participating in the emergency response to



Unloading emergency supplies in the Caribbean and Central America region

Hurricane Fifi, which ravaged Honduras in 1974. That initial response led to interventions in the areas of health, nutrition, education, and community development. During the 1980s, Save the Children UK worked to alleviate the suffering of children caught up in the sub-region's man-made disasters: the armed conflicts of Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador.

In the Caribbean, we began operations in Jamaica in 1988, after Hurricane Gilbert. As earlier in Central America, we established a series of health and community development projects. And in the 1990s, with the help of the European Commission's Office of Humanitarian Aid, we expanded our work to Cuba and Haiti in response to emergencies in those countries.

During the 1990s, CARICA's programming focus changed from direct implementation to support of partners' projects, with the

implied strengthening of both official and non-governmental capacities. The focus was broadened from providing services to research, technical assistance, promotion of child participation, and fostering the creation of networks and alliances. Save the Children UK applied this methodology in CARICA's development programmes as well as in its Emergency Preparedness programme.

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CARICA's experience with emergency situations such as Hurricane Mitch in 1988, the Salvadoran earthquakes of 2001, and Hurricane Michelle in Honduras and Cuba in 2002, underscores the importance of working in normal circumstances, before disaster strikes, to fortify the capabilities of local organisations to respond to emergency situations while protecting the rights of children.

What we did

The programme's principle activities involved mitigation initiatives aimed at softening the blow of disasters, emergency preparedness trainings, and the participatory development and publication of emergency preparedness materials.

Mitigation efforts took the form of aiding communities hit by hurricanes in Honduras and Cuba and by earthquakes in El Salvador, beginning in the 1990s. We provided victims, and especially children, with material goods, social services, mental and physical health services, and nutritional aid. We helped their families with economic revitalisation following the emergency.

The programme sponsored workshops on caring for children during emergency situations and involving youth in emergency preparedness. The trainings were delivered to 46 institutions from 13 countries. Books published include "Programming Manual for Children's Rights in Emergency Preparedness and Response," and "The Rights of Children and Reduction of Risks arising from Disasters in Central America and the Caribbean." We also sponsored the publication of local emergency plans for Alliance members in Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador and Haiti.

Our partners

We worked in Honduras, El Salvador, Mexico, Guatemala, Cuba, Haiti, and Jamaica with the following organisations: members of the Save the Children Alliance in South America and the CARICA region.; associates of Save the Children UK and non-associated organisations with a history in disaster response or of participation in

our other programmes; church organisations and other community groups that have provided humanitarian assistance during emergencies; children's organisations in South America that have benefited from previous disaster rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts of the International Save the Children Alliance; specialized academic organisations that have collaborated with Save the Children UK; and local and national governmental entities dedicated to working in the field.

Results

Direct benefits for children

Children in Honduras, Cuba and El Salvador were direct recipients of emergency food, drinking water, shelter, and medical attention during emergencies in those countries. Children also received emergency preparedness training and are safer because of the training their parents received and the planning and other mitigation activities carried out by their communities.

Advocacy

As a result of programme advocacy efforts, governmental and non-governmental partners in the CARICA region are equipped with a more comprehensive vision of the risks and vulnerabilities associated with natural disasters in their countries. As a result, they are better prepared to prevent or mitigate the harmful effects of emergencies and to respond to disaster when it becomes unavoidable. Some of our partners possess emergency preparedness plans as a result of programme activities and all of them have gained basic knowledge and capabilities in emergency preparedness and disaster response with a focus on children's rights. Programme curriculum covered minimum standards of quality in the provision of emergency services, a code of conduct, and information on the rights of children.

Networking

The project made a significant contribution to the construction and development of local, national and international networks

focused on emergency response in Latin America and its regions. This networking directly involved 539 people from 166 organizations, through 18 workshops held in 13 countries.

Programme partners in El Salvador established a coordinating mechanism and produced a joint proposal to attract external financing of additional projects related to protection of children in disasters. In Nicaragua, partner organisations are producing a joint strategy for the implementation of Project Sphere and for the institutionalisation of a basic approach to rights in disaster work. After participating in two programme-sponsored workshops, Save the Children Honduras elaborated its own disaster response plan.

Advances against discrimination

Females constituted about 65 per cent of participating youth, and were able to assume leadership roles in disaster preparation and prevention activities. In this way the programme contributed to the development of more equitable gender relations at the community level.

What we learned

Beyond the immediate material response to emergencies, our greatest contribution was to ensure that the rights of children are taken into account in emergency response and risk reduction activities. We got this message across at the local, national and regional levels as a preparatory activity, so as to ensure that the policies will be put into practice during future emergencies.

Best practice in the face of a potential emergency is simply to be ready. Planning and organisation for a coordinated response is essential. Teams should be set up in advance and the resources for emergency response lined up. During an emergency is no time to be scrambling for basic supplies. Emergency preparedness efforts should include the maintenance of an up-to-date price index for items likely to be needed in an emergency so that purchases can be made quickly.

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While Cuba was far more advanced than the other CARICA countries in terms of organisation, education, and the ability to mobilise people in case of emergency, the Cuban system is very bureaucratic, and red tape combined with communications problems could cause delays in the acquisition of materials.

Programme funded simulations of emergency situations proved to be very useful in raising the awareness of children. Having learned to not only seek safety but to help orient and provide services for other community members, the children who participated in emergency drills and the development of contingency plans not only deepened their appreciation of these issues, but accrued self esteem and leadership development benefits as well. These children developed attributes that make them potential agents for positive change within their communities.

The formal and public education system provides an excellent venue for awareness raising and leadership development on the issues of disaster prevention and emergency response.

In countries like Cuba that have a difficult relationship with the United States and its allies, an NGO like Save the Children UK should make a continuous and concerted effort to maintain good relations with the government. Having an established relationship of mutual respect and trust greatly facilitated the administration of aid in times of emergency.

In some cases, bringing in foreign experts to lead training sessions proved problematic, especially when the foreign expert did not have a clear understanding of the Central American context or the terminology employed there. Culturally sensitive instruction was much more effective.

The programme's national or local workshops seemed to be more effective than its regional or international workshops. The local workshops were more cost effective, they were accessible to a greater number of people, and produced more useful feedback.

Other learning case studies from the Caribbean and Central America

- [Child labour and poverty reduction in Honduras & Guatemala](#)
- [Juvenile justice in Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua & Guatemala](#)
- [Child participation in Cuba](#)
- [HIV and AIDS in Jamaica](#)
- [Advocacy in public policy in Honduras](#)
- [Commercial sexual exploitation of children in Honduras](#)

Feedback:

If you have any comments regarding any of the issues highlighted in this case study or are interested in acquiring further information on "Emergency preparedness in the Caribbean and Central America" or any of our other work in the Latin America and the Caribbean, Middle East and North Africa, and South East Europe region, please contact the LACMESEE Regional Office at lacmesees@savethechildren.org

Learning case studies:

This case study is one of a wider series focusing on learning from experience in key areas of our programmes work. If you have ideas for topics we should examine in other learning case studies or any other comments please contact Gema Vicente at g.vicente@savethechildren.org