



Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA)
Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean, San José, Costa Rica

DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

USAID/OFDA Surge Program Enhances Response Operations

How does the USAID/OFDA regional office for Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) mount swift and effective responses when disasters simultaneously strike multiple countries in the region?

Through an innovative and nimble surge capacity mechanism that allows USAID/OFDA to quickly and efficiently expand its human resource base to assess and respond to sudden-onset disasters in different countries throughout the region.

The mechanism is part of the USAID/OFDA Regional Disaster Assistance Program (RDAP) and includes a network of 19 disaster risk management specialists (DRMSes) located throughout the region. These specialists support disaster response and disaster risk reduction activities and conduct preparedness training and technical assistance to promote local and national self-sufficiency.

In addition to the DRMS network, the RDAP maintains a cadre of approximately 330 on-call disaster management consultants, or surge consultants, located in 27 countries throughout the region who work as needed during disasters.

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Photo by Alhy Daniel Núñez, USAID/OFDA

USAID/OFDA surge consultants accompany Mexican Red Cross and Mexican Civil Protection Agency representatives to inspect USAID/OFDA-donated kitchen sets for distribution to flood-affected families in northeastern Mexico after Hurricane Alex and Tropical Depression Two in 2010.

DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

USAID/OFDA Supports Meeting to Introduce the ICS to Mayors in Ecuador



Photo by Michael Camchong, USAID/OFDA

Attendees learn about Guayaquil's experience implementing the USAID/OFDA-supported ICS process.

On March 8 and 9, USAID/OFDA supported a meeting for mayors and other representatives from 14 municipalities in Ecuador to learn about the Incident Command System (ICS) and its implementation process.

For several years, USAID/OFDA has supported the establishment of the ICS in Guayaquil Municipality through the RDAP.

Guayaquil has now established the ICS as the organizing principal for all emergency and disaster responses and is carrying the process forward with minimal support from USAID/OFDA.

The Government of Ecuador's National Risk Management Secretariat

(SNGR) has also adopted the ICS approach and is encouraging the remainder of the country's municipalities to use the ICS as the basis for their risk management plans.

USAID/OFDA and USAID/Ecuador, which supports municipalities in improving development planning processes, are supporting these efforts.

"The meeting was a very hands-on event and gave mayors a better idea what it means to implement the ICS," said USAID/OFDA Regional Advisor Julie Leonard. "We also looked at possible follow-up activities to determine how we can continue to offer support in this area."

RDAP Surge Consultant Program

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Surge consultants typically are local professionals familiar with the local language and customs who can provide the USAID/OFDA team with insight into a country's political and geographic landscapes.

The surge mechanism rapidly augments the on-the-ground presence, reach, and capability of the USAID/OFDA team. As a storm approaches, or immediately following a disaster, the senior regional advisor at the LAC regional office may request the deployment of surge consultants as part of a USAID/OFDA assessment or response team. The consultants can arrive on site within hours to provide timely and cost-effective assistance with preliminary assessments or response activities, as required. Once operations end, the surge mechanism is shut off.

The surge program is based on a proactive approach to dealing with disasters that combines local capacity building with quick and efficient response operations. Because the surge consultants have previously participated in USAID/OFDA risk management training events, they are familiar with the office's mandate, planning processes, decision-making criteria, and problem-solving techniques.

In fact, because the surge program has become such an important part of regional operations, the RDAP is planning to launch an online course for surge consultants, in English and Spanish, that will enable consultants anywhere in the region to refresh their knowledge of USAID/OFDA disaster response and risk reduction activities.

Working with USAID/OFDA staff on a disaster response allows the surge consultants to build on their knowledge base. They return to their jobs empowered by the skills and experience gained through participating in a U.S. Government (USG) disaster response, further enhancing local capacity building and strengthening relationships with USAID/OFDA.

Consultants build and maintain close ties with the DRMSes and LAC regional office staff. They often provide early information about significant events in their respective countries, which helps USAID/OFDA with early warning, rapid response, and strategic planning.

The surge capacity program was born out of a need to respond more quickly and efficiently to disasters in a manner consistent with the LAC regional team strategy of building local capacities to respond to disasters. Following a particularly active hurricane season in 2005, which required simultaneous response efforts in different countries, the LAC team devised the surge capacity program to meet that need.

Today, the LAC team routinely employs surge consultants during disaster response operations. Those in charge of coordinating USG disaster responses consider the surge program an integral piece of the response puzzle, a wise use of resources that results in faster, more efficient, and appropriate response operations, with the added benefit of increasing local capacities to successfully manage future emergencies.

"I'm proud that the surge staff are highly experienced, low maintenance contributors from their home countries, which adds value to USAID/OFDA's ability to respond and support host countries when countries make requests for humanitarian assistance," said Senior Regional Advisor Tim Callaghan. "The high quality of the surge personnel has allowed us to respond to multiple disaster situations at the same time in a timely fashion."

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DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

Second Haiti Study Tour Planned

USAID/OFDA is organizing a second Haiti Study Tour to share lessons learned in urban disaster recovery and risk reduction following the 2010 earthquake response.

The study tour will take place in Port-au-Prince from March 27 to 29 and focus on urban shelter and settlements issues in disaster response.

"The idea is for participants to be catalysts within their organizations, able to promote improved urban preparedness and risk reduction in their own countries," said USAID/OFDA Regional Advisor Phil Gelman, who is helping to organize the study tour.

The first Haiti Study Tour took place from October 4 to 6, 2011, with 11 participants from Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Peru, and Trinidad and Tobago.

The January 12, 2010, magnitude 7.0 earthquake near Port-au-Prince was one of the largest urban disasters in the Western Hemisphere and one of the most severe to ever strike a national capital.



Photo by Sarah Bailin, USAID/OFDA

Participants of the first Haiti Study Tour visit infrastructure rehabilitation projects in Port-au-Prince.

COMING UP

U.S. National Hurricane Conference

USAID/OFDA Regional Advisor John Kimbrough and DRMSes from the Caribbean region plan to participate in the 2012 National Hurricane Conference in Orlando, Florida, from March 26 to 29. The goal of the conference is to improve hurricane preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation in order to save lives and property in the United States and the tropical islands of the Caribbean and the Pacific.

USAID/OFDA Workshops for MDROs

USAID/OFDA is planning three workshops with U.S. mission disaster relief officers (MDROs) from throughout the region to discuss USAID/OFDA disaster preparedness and response capabilities. A workshop for MDROs in South America is scheduled from April 24 to 25 in Quito, Ecuador; a workshop for MDROs in the Caribbean is scheduled for May 8 and 9 in Bridgetown, Barbados; and a workshop for MDROs in Central America and Mexico is scheduled for May 15 and 16 in San Salvador, El Salvador.

JHOC for U.S. Military Staff in Ecuador

USAID/OFDA Humanitarian Assistance Advisor to the Military Robert Dunsmore is organizing a Joint Humanitarian Operations Course (JHOC) for U.S. military staff in Ecuador, on April 3 and 4. The JHOC provides U.S. military staff with an overview of USAID/OFDA disaster response and preparedness capabilities to improve coordination for future joint disaster response operations abroad.