



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

DISASTER RISK REDUCTION



Photo by Manuel Ramírez, USAID/OFDA

Student safety brigades participate in the II School Safety Knowledge Olympics in Santiago de Cali, Colombia, part of the Healthy and Safe School program supported by the USAID/OFDA Regional Disaster Assistance Program.

Education for Disaster Risk Reduction

Through the Regional Disaster Assistance Program (RDAP), USAID/OFDA works with elementary schools, high schools, and universities throughout Latin America and the Caribbean to make the facilities safer places and to incorporate disaster preparedness and risk reduction concepts into curricula.

Toward these goals, USAID/OFDA promotes the School Safety Course, works with UNICEF and other organizations to promote minimum standards for education in emergencies, and is part of an inter-institutional alliance created earlier this year to focus on strengthening disaster

risk reduction (DRR) education in Latin America. The RDAP also works with nearly two dozen universities to promote DRR within the institutions and in the surrounding communities.

"We are trying to promote acceptance of the general idea of DRR, whether in elementary schools, high schools, universities, or government education ministries," explained Manuel Ramírez, who coordinates the RDAP educational component.

Ramírez and other RDAP disaster risk management specialists work closely with staff from 23 universities in Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, Domini-

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Staff and students at the República de Puerto Rico School in Panama City participate in an emergency drill as part of the USAID/OFDA-designed School Safety Course.



Photo by Manuel Ramírez, USAID/OFDA

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School Safety Course Helps To Transform Community

The USAID/OFDA-designed School Safety Course has sparked significant, lasting change at the community level in some countries.

In Colombia, in the impoverished Comuna Uno in Santiago de Cali, for example, a teacher who completed the course became so inspired by its message that she rallied the entire town to action to address vulnerabilities and transform their neighborhoods into safer and healthier places.

"These communities are committed to social transformation," explained the teacher, María Consuelo Rocha. She said efforts began about three years ago when she and several other USAID/OFDA-trained instructors of the School Safety Course decided they wanted to

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Photo by Manuel Ramírez, USAID/OFDA

Comuna Uno in Colombia is set on a steep slope and subject to multiple disaster risks.

DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

DRR Course Available Online Through Wisconsin University

USAID/OFDA and the University of Wisconsin-Madison Disaster Management Center have launched an online DRR self-study course. The purpose is to provide concepts, information, and tools that will increase awareness and understanding of disaster risk management in general and risk reduction, transfer, and financing in particular. Anyone can enroll in the course for free; those who wish to obtain university credit must pay a small fee. For information, see <http://dmc.engr.wisc.edu>

Incorporating DRR into Education

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can Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, and Peru to promote disaster preparedness and risk reduction awareness. USAID/OFDA has signed formal memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with at least 10.

"Together with each higher education institution, USAID/OFDA tries to tailor a disaster preparedness and risk reduction program from the perspective of what the university wants and needs. My message is based on the concepts of a quality education with a psychosocial, humanistic focus, on the reality of the countries, on the needs of society, and on the fact that universities can help fulfill these needs," Ramirez explained.

SCHOOL SAFETY COURSE

The USAID/OFDA-designed School Safety Course, created in the 1990s and updated regularly, has helped thousands of elementary schools in 15 Latin American countries become better prepared to respond to emergencies. Last year, the course was adapted for use in the English-speaking Caribbean.

The course provides teachers and other staff with the concepts and tools necessary to reduce disaster risks and produce emergency preparedness and response plans for their schools.

Several first response institutions in the region, including the Colombian National Firefighters Corps and the Colombian Civil Defense, have officially adopted the course as part of their internal training programs to ensure efficient responses to emergencies in schools.

Due to the success and popularity of the School Safety Course, it has become the foundation of the RDAP educational component.

"The School Safety Course has served as an entry point for USAID/OFDA to work with public education ministries and universities throughout the region to promote not only emergency preparedness but also DRR in general. Through the course, governments and university leaders have seen the need to incorporate DRR into planning processes and policies and university thinking and curricula," Ramirez explained.

ALLIANCES

USAID/OFDA is a member of a new group entitled "Constructing Alliances for the Strengthening of the Education Sector in Disaster Risk Reduction." Other members include UNICEF, UNESCO, Plan International, Save the Children, CEPREDENAC, CAPRADE, International Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction, and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

The alliance, created in May 2009 in Lima, Peru, has defined 10 priority actions to advance DRR education in the region. USAID/OFDA has committed to assisting with three of them: ensuring that DRR curriculum proposals made by countries' ministries of education are accompanied by processes to train instructors and professors in these concepts; supporting the incorporation of DRR concepts into education ministries' ongoing staff training programs; and helping to draft a description of the basic DRR competencies that all teaching staff should acquire in the course of their regular training.

USAID/OFDA/LAC is also working to establish a bilateral agreement with UNICEF to promote minimum standards for education in emergency situations in the countries of the region, as well as working together to design a risk management course for the education sector. The Spanish-language course will be ready in early 2010.

USAID/OFDA also funds the "DRR in the Americas" program implemented by Florida International University. The program works with universities throughout Latin America to advance DRR concepts related to land use and environmental management.

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COMING UP

New Regional Advisor to Join LAC Team

USAID/OFDA is pleased to announce the arrival of new Regional Advisor John Kimbrough in the LAC regional office in San Jose in early January. Regional Advisor Kimbrough, who previously worked with USAID/OFDA in Sudan, will focus on the Caribbean Region, including the monitoring of USAID/OFDA-funded disaster risk reduction projects and assisting with disaster response activities as necessary.

Costa Rica Forest Firefighter Mobilization

USAID/OFDA disaster risk management specialists Luisa Alfaro and Fernando Calderón are providing technical assistance to Costa Rica's National Forest Fire Commission in preparation for the III National Forest Firefighter Brigade Mobilization Exercise. The event will take place from January 14 to 17, 2010, in Atenas, in Alajuela Province, with the goal of providing the nation's brigades with an opportunity to measure capabilities and exchange best practices to mitigate and control forest fires.

Disaster Management Alliance Conference

USAID/OFDA disaster risk management specialists and staff from the regional office will participate in the Disaster Management Alliance's annual conference, organized by the Pan American Development Foundation and supported by USAID/OFDA. The "Regional Integration Conference: Driving Effective Partnerships for Disaster Management and Business Continuity" will take place from January 19 to 21, 2010, in Guatemala City. More than 70 participants from 11 countries will attend the meeting with the goal of learning from each other's challenges and successes regarding public-private alliances to prepare for disasters and reduce disaster risks.

Making Comuna Uno a Safer Place

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spread the knowledge among the staff and students of the area.

As a result, more than three dozen public and private schools and high schools, in coordination with local community leaders, business groups, and universities, are now working together to promote disaster risk management.

"The change has been very positive, because despite the fact that this is a high-risk, low-income community located precariously on the side of a steep slope, the process has permitted residents to identify the risks that exist in their schools, houses, and community in general. As a result, the level of awareness is greater and work to mitigate potential disasters has increased," Rocha said.

In addition, more than 70 percent of the teachers in Comuna Uno have completed the School Safety Course, known by its Spanish-language acronym CUSE (*Curso de Seguridad Escolar*).

"The role of the CUSE is vital because it provides the base line, the reference point for training and awareness of school safety among teachers. The course opens the doors for disaster risk reduction education. Within the schools, teachers are training school safety brigades and have posted informational signs to aid with emergency preparedness," Rocha explained.

She noted the assistance provided by USAID/OFDA disaster risk management specialists was also key to the success of the program.

"We would not be where we are today if we had not received their knowledge and moral support," Rocha said. "We don't have much of a budget, so we have had to utilize all the human and logistical resources within reach to attain the goals we had set."

Such is the success of the program that other communities in Santiago de Cali have begun to request assistance from those involved in Comuna Uno to begin programs of their own; and the Education Secretary has requested assistance to establish a similar school safety program citywide.