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DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

Forum Explores DRR in Higher Education in Latin America

In an unprecedented gathering of minds, university professors, academic researchers, and experts in the field of disaster risk management, recently gathered to share ideas and explore strategies for the integration of higher education into national disaster risk reduction (DRR) frameworks.

The "Latin American Forum on Disaster Risk Reduction in Higher Education" took place in Panama City, Panama, from August 28 to 30, 2012. The Latin American and Caribbean University Network for Emergency and Disaster Risk Reduction (REDULAC), Specialized University of the Americas (UDELAS), and the Central American Higher Education Council (CSUCA) organized the forum, with support from USAID/OFDA and the U.N. International Strategy for Disaster Reduction. The meeting assembled 136 representatives from 104 organizations in 21 countries in the Americas to discuss the DRR research potential of institutions in higher education and the benefits of applying DRR concepts to national efforts.

Additionally, dozens of universities and numerous emergency response agencies participated remotely via Internet, in a virtual forum that expanded tenfold the presence and reach of the Panama forum. Students and professors observed the panel discussions broadcast live in their classrooms and submitted their comments and questions by e-mail to be discussed by forum participants. A total of 28 universities in eight countries participated virtually in the three-day forum.



Photo courtesy of UDELAS

"This DRR in Higher Education forum represents years of work experience that USAID/OFDA has put into developing a regional plan, a common language, and a culture of prevention, dedicated to saving lives and mitigating the effects of disasters on society. By integrating disaster risk management into higher education, as stated in our regional plan for Latin America and the Caribbean, we enable critical information and knowledge to permeate university careers, future professionals, and eventually

the future leaders of Latin American countries," said USAID/OFDA Regional Advisor Sidney Velado, keynote speaker and co-organizer of the event.

The format consisted of panels with subject experts, followed by interactive group discussions. Themes included incorporating DRR into higher education careers, DRR research by universities, university commitment to applying DRR research to social action, social media and DRR, university networks and their contributions to DRR in the region, DRR communities of knowledge and practice, and more.

University heads and professors shared experiences of integrating DRR into their curricula, programs, and policies. For example, Florida International University's five-year program on integrating DRR in the Americas is supporting the educational and professional development of the next generation of DRR "thinkers" in Latin America through scholarships, student and fac-

Continued on page 2



Photo by Pedro Soto, USAID/OFDA

Tim Callaghan, USAID/OFDA Senior Regional Advisor for Latin America and the Caribbean, addresses participants during the regional forum on DRR in Higher Education, held in Panama in late August 2012. Above, a group photo of forum participants.



Photo by Pedro Soto, USAID/OFDA

CSUCA Secretary General Juan Alfonso Fuentes discusses the importance of DRR in higher education during the regional forum.

Regional Forum on DRR in Higher Education

Continued from page 1

ulty exchanges, and small grants to strengthen disaster management.

Universities throughout Latin America are now beginning to graduate professionals, including urban planners, land-use managers, and builders, who are knowledgeable about disaster risk management and better able to incorporate DRR into their countries' sustainable development.

The forum also explored how academics and university researchers can form communities of practice to improve the application of DRR to certain sectors. These communities represent an array of experts, from university professors dedicated to researching solutions and strategies to non-governmental organizations, emergency response organizations, and other government agencies, such as urban planners or water and sanitation boards. The anticipated result: a society with improved capacity to identify and mitigate risks, as well as increased preparedness for responding appropriately to the effects of disasters.

"From an academic and scientific point of view, there is no doubt that prevention represents the most efficient and effective way to manage our increasing vulnerability to the diseases that affect our populations and the disasters that frequently hinder development possibilities in the region," said CSUCA Secretary General Juan Alfonso Fuentes.

Asked about the success of the forum, Manuel Ramírez, who coordinates the School Safety Component of USAID/OFDA's Regional Disaster Assistance Program and who acted as Academic Coordinator of the event in Panama, said, "Without a doubt, thanks to the participating institutions and organizations, as well as the results obtained, this forum represents the greatest international academic activity that has ever taken place dealing exclusively with institutionalization of DRR in higher education in Latin America."

Participants, both virtual and physically present, were invited to share documentation about their DRR projects, investigations, and accomplishments. A growing collection of data, along with the virtual forum broadcast, links to universities and organizations in the network, and information about future DRR-related events, can be found on the REDULAC web site: www.redulac.net.

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DISASTER RESPONSE

IOM Distributes USAID/OFDA Supplies to Haitians Affected by Tropical Storm Isaac

Tropical Storm Isaac made landfall in Haiti on August 24 and 25, causing more than two dozen deaths and damaging or destroying nearly 300 houses, mostly in the southeastern part of the country. The storm also damaged a number of tents in Port-au-Prince earthquake displacement camps.

Government of Haiti (GoH) authorities and international partners preemptively evacuated 14,375 people, primarily from Port-au-Prince displacement camps, in the first-ever preventive evacuation led by the GoH. The effort came after months of USAID/OFDA-supported training, simulation exercises, rehabilitation of evacuation shelters, and development of procedures for managing the shelters.

Following the storm, USAID/OFDA partner the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and other relief agencies distributed pre-positioned USAID/OFDA commodities to affected individuals in West and Southeast departments. In total, USAID/OFDA provided nearly 8,700 hygiene kits to benefit approximately 43,500 people, nearly 7,200 collapsible 10-liter water containers for approximately 36,000 people, and two plastic sheets or tarps each to approximately 8,750 families, or 43,750 people, to repair damaged tents and other shelters. USAID/OFDA is in the process of replenishing these supplies at IOM's warehouses in Haiti.



Photo by Robert Dunsmore, USAID/OFDA

Haitians affected by Tropical Storm Isaac await the distribution of USAID/OFDA relief supplies.

DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

USAID/OFDA Helps with Post-Tsunami Survey

On August 26, a magnitude 7.2 offshore earthquake caused a tsunami in El Salvador that measured up to six meters at impact and affected approximately 30 kilometers of coast.

While neither event caused fatalities or significant damage, flooding from the tsunami reached up to 300 meters inland. However, most communities reside at least 500 meters inland.

In early September, USAID/OFDA Regional Advisor Julie Leonard participated in a post-tsunami survey in El Salvador, organized by the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's International Tsunami Information Center and conducted in conjunction with Government of El Salvador authorities.

Survey results identified several gaps in relevant science and early warning systems; the full report will be available in the coming weeks.



Photo by Julie Leonard, USAID/OFDA

Members of the survey team take measurements in coastal areas affected by the tsunami in El Salvador.