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OFDA Disaster Specialist in Dominica Weathers Hurricane, Initiates Emergency Response

As Hurricane Maria bore down on Dominica on the night of September 18, Cecil Shillingford, a USAID Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA) disaster risk management specialist and life-long Dominican resident, took shelter from the 160-mile-per-hour winds in his home outside the capital city of Roseau.

Seeking cover on the lower-level of the house, Cecil could feel the floor and walls vibrating, while the winds drove heavy rainfall indoors. “I lost contact completely with the rest of the world. I couldn’t call anybody....I couldn’t pick up any radio stations,” Cecil said. In the morning, Cecil found his neighbor’s entire roof, including a 1,000-gallon water tank, sitting in his yard. A portion of his neighbor’s roof had punched a hole in his roof, leading Cecil’s home to flood completely. “When I went out into the community, I saw that almost every house had lost its roof. A lot of the wooden houses just collapsed completely.” In all, Hurricane Maria affected Dominica’s entire population of at least 71,000 residents and caused widespread infrastructure damage.

Immediately following the storm, Cecil set out on foot for the national Emergency Operations Center (EOC) in Roseau, a walk that took more than three hours—twice as long as usual. “You had to climb over landslides, you had to climb over trees, you had to go under trees. The entire road surface was covered with either trees or landslides,” Cecil reports.



Photo by Julian Wyss/USAID

When he arrived at the EOC, Cecil made contact with USAID/OFDA colleagues via satellite phone and began supporting life-saving emergency relief efforts in coordination with Dominican counterparts. Based on Cecil’s extensive background as a former National Disaster Coordinator, the Government of the Commonwealth of Dominica (GoCD) asked Cecil to help oversee EOC activities. Cecil also acted as the primary interlocutor between the GoCD and USAID/OFDA. Through his efforts and those of other members of the USAID Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) in Dominica, USAID/OFDA provided assistance, including temporary shelter support and access to safe drinking water, to more than 70,000 Dominicans within weeks.

While the humanitarian situation in Dominica has improved and the DART has left, Cecil will continue to support USAID/OFDA-funded recovery efforts on the island through the coming months. Asked why he has chosen a career in humanitarian assistance, Cecil replied, “Because I love it. I love humanitarian work. Even if I wasn’t called, I would still be here volunteering.”

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