



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 Staff Visit Forges Alliances with U.S. Universities

In an effort to strengthen institutional emergency response capabilities, promote natural hazard mitigation, and build a culture of resilience in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), USAID/OFDA is forging alliances with several U.S. universities.

Toward this end, staff from the USAID/OFDA Regional Office for LAC and the USAID/OFDA Regional Disaster Assistance Program (RDAP) recently met with university professors, graduate students, and directors from the State University of New York at Buffalo (UB), the Center for Rebuilding Sustainable Communities after Disasters at the University of Massachusetts Boston (UMass Boston), and the Yale School of Medicine-affiliated Yale New Haven Health System Center for Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Response (YNHHS-CEPDR).

"These visits with specialized applied research centers in the United States aimed to build relationships that foster the work that USAID/OFDA performs in the LAC region, particularly with universities. In addition, we wish to provide points of contact in the United States for researchers from the LAC region interested in expanding their academic portfolios related to disaster risk reduction (DRR), as well as disaster preparedness and response," explained USAID/OFDA Regional Advisor Sidney Velado. He noted that for several years, USAID/OFDA has supported the Latin American and Caribbean University Network for Disaster Risk Reduction (REDULAC).

At UB, the USAID/OFDA team learned about developments in earthquake-resilient structures and multi-hazard mitigation strategies developed with the National Center of Earthquake Engineering to Extreme Events,

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Photo courtesy of James Paturas, YNHHS

USAID/OFDA representatives meet with professors and staff from Yale University and the Yale New Haven Health System.

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Photo by Jacqueline Montoya, USAID/OFDA

USAID/OFDA disaster risk management specialists and USAR personnel from 11 Latin American countries visit the site of the fatal October 2013 collapse of Tower Six, part of the recently constructed Space Building in Medellín, Colombia, to explore the role of USAR experts in urban planning and DRR activities.

USAR Site Visit Promotes Safer Cities

When disasters occur, they often provide lessons on how to avoid or minimize similar tragedies in the future. To explore these lessons in the areas of urban search-and-rescue (USAR) and DRR, USAID/OFDA recently supported a study tour in Medellín, Colombia, to review the humanitarian response to the collapse of a high-rise apartment building.

Participants in the tour, held from February 26 to 28 in collaboration with the Medellín mayor's office, included RDAP disaster risk management specialists (DRMSs), members of the Medellín Municipality Disaster Risk Management Department (DAGR) and other city officials, and USAR personnel from Colombia and 11 other countries in the region, including Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Peru, Saint Kitts and Nevis, and Uruguay.

The October 2013 collapse of Tower Six, a 24-story segment of the recently constructed Space Building in Medellín, resulted in 11 fatalities, including 10 construction workers and a building resident. Authorities had evacuated the tower a day earlier after cracks were found in the building's structure. After the collapse, the remaining towers in the Space Building development were evacuated as a precautionary measure and some scheduled for demolition.

Experiences such as this and at least five similar large-scale building collapses in various LAC countries during the past three years have inspired USAR system experts to take a closer look at common urban vulnerabilities in which natural hazards, such as earthquakes or hurricanes, are not a factor.

Participants in the USAID/OFDA
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DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

Forest Community in Paraguay Welcomes First Firefighter Brigade

Paraguay's Alto Verá Municipality, which borders the expansive forests of the San Rafael Reserve, recently inaugurated its first firefighter brigade; a welcome asset for protecting the biologically rich area that is plagued annually by forest fires.

Men, women, and youth volunteers from the Alto Verá community, including Guaraní indigenous inhabitants, make up the new brigade. They have already demonstrated their skills battling recent blazes.

With support from the Tropical Forest Conservation Fund and an RDAP small grant, local non-governmental organization Promotores Ambientales de San Rafael supplied firefighting equipment and infrastructure to the brigade and conducted community fire prevention awareness campaigns. USAID/OFDA also supported development of a municipal forest fire management policy.

RDAP has provided fire management training to residents of Alto Verá and other communities in Paraguay since 2001.



Members of the Alto Verá fire brigade after the February inauguration ceremony.

Photo by Jorge Martin, USAID/OFDA



Photo by Jacqueline Montoya, USAID/OFDA

DAGRDR engineer Jaime Ramírez, left, tells USAR tour participants about Medellín's response to the 24-story building's collapse. The USAID/OFDA-supported visit aimed to foster greater participation of USAR staff in urban planning and risk reduction activities.

USAR Site Visit Promotes Safer Cities

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OFDA-supported study tour had the opportunity to visit the Space Building site and observe the demolition of Tower Five. Colombia's national and municipal risk management system authorities ordered the tower's demolition based largely on research suggesting the risk of imminent collapse.

Tour participants compared their countries' experiences and discussed alternative approaches to urban planning based on the numerous lessons learned by DAGRD, government authorities, and the emergency responders in Medellín.

The group also analyzed ways in which each country's USAR program could evolve from exclusively rescue-oriented operations to multifaceted DRR work with municipal and national governments to improve building and infrastructure codes and assist with emergency planning in urban settings.

"It is necessary to approach the subject of urban search-and-rescue as an integral element of a national process in which actors from different areas, such as the government, industrial, business, and education sectors, work together on key decision-making and urban planning," explained Colombia-based USAID/OFDA DRMS Jacqueline Montoya.

USAID/OFDA DRMS Manuel Santana, who coordinates the USAR component of RDAP, noted the importance of urban DRR for the future of Latin America's quickly growing cities.

"We must take a look at the dynamics that generate vulnerability in urban areas; they are linked to the spatial distribution, design, and construction of urban structures. Since 2001, RDAP's USAR program has emphasized the importance of developing national capacities and strengthening institutional response capabilities to emergency scenarios at the domestic level," he said.

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which is headquartered at UB. The team also visited UB's Center for Geohazards Studies, which studies early warning systems for hydrometeorological events and volcanic eruptions, as well as geohazard monitoring and research. UB professors also explained their role in the PEOPLES Resilience Framework – a holistic framework for defining and measuring disaster resilience in different areas, such as environmental, economic, and social/cultural, among others.

The group also saw first-hand the cutting-edge technical capabilities of the YNHHS-CEPDR, primarily in the public health and medical emergencies field. The center is an integral part of the state-level emergency response system and serves as an example for the LAC region of effective institution-state disaster management collaboration, according to Velado.

Finally, the team toured the Center for Rebuilding Sustainable Communities after Disasters at UMass Boston, which studies human rights-based approaches to the protection of vulnerable populations during post-disaster reconstruction.

Prior USAID/OFDA collaboration with U.S. universities includes work with the University of Wisconsin to develop online disaster management courses and a five-year cooperative agreement with Florida International University to strengthen DRR programs in the LAC region. More recently, USAID/OFDA developed a relationship with Louisiana State University's Stephenson Disaster Management Institute, including a study tour that gave Central American professors an opportunity to learn about the role of the university in disaster management.

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