

# case study

## Community Disaster Response Teams in Dominica: A Closer Look at Sustainability & Response

### Overview

In September 2017, Hurricane Maria devastated the island of Dominica which was still recovering from the overwhelming impact of Tropical Storm (TS) Erika in August 2015. As a Small Island Developing State (SID) Dominica's response mechanisms were limited before TS Erika and the last hurricane to strike the island was David in 1979.

The ability of Dominicans to be resilient and cope with widespread damage, loss of life and property is an experience which many can learn from. This study explores the Community Disaster Response Teams' (CDRT) responses and magnifies some best practices which can be replicated across SIDS with similar characteristics and culture. It is hoped that the findings in this case study and leads to improved response capacity and the sustainability of the CDRT approach regionally.

### Background

The opportunity to explore the sustainability of CDRT's in Dominica has been brought to the forefront by the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance's (USAID OFDA) *Capacity Building Initiative for Disaster Preparedness and Response in Caribbean Red Cross National Societies* project. The project's overarching goal is to assist in building the RCNS's capacity to support enhanced community resilience.

Additionally, the opportunity was taken to understand the value of early warnings to community preparedness and effective response. Improving community early warning systems in the Caribbean is a focus of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) in partnership with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA), through funding by the European Union through its Disaster Preparedness Program of the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DIPECHO).

The primary focus of this case study is to document the response of the CDRTs and share best practices which can further enhance Community Disaster Response Team capacities and sustainability regionally.



*Housing reconstruction after Hurricane Maria in Dominica.  
Source: Dominica Red Cross Society.*

### Methodology

The methodology used in this case study was a semi-structured interview questionnaire, which sought to review the CDRT responses and capture some best practices. The interview questions were also scripted toward gaining information on multiple, but very distinct thematic areas including: crisis communications, gender role, organizational structure and leadership, the CDRT training program improvement opportunities, logistical constraints post-impact and sustainability.

In this case study information is primarily from the Layou CDRT community of Dominica which is composed mainly of women. Key informant interviews were held with Mr. Dale Laurent - Chairman of the Layou CDRT Mrs. Karen Cuffy - Director of Disaster Management and Mr. Kendall Laurent, the Water and Sanitation for Health (WASH) Officer both of the Dominican Red Cross Society (DRCS). Due to his previous role as Field Coordinator at the DRCS. Mr. K. Laurent provided valuable insight into the development of CDRTs in Dominica.

Training opportunities in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines as well as Antigua and Barbuda, were also used to conduct informal interviews with CDRTs from these territories.

## Learning from Past Experience

After the experiences of TS Erika (2015) the Layou community CDRT members decided to ensure certain preparatory activities were in place before the next hurricane season. As such, in June 2017, CDRT members began updating all relevant data bases for the new hurricane cycle. These included listing community members who were available to assist in response efforts, checking on the availability of rescue equipment and transportation needs, recording supplies in their storeroom, confirming active team members and their contact information and keeping updated the community's vulnerability assessments.

## Best Practices in Response Hurricane Maria

The national early warning system gave the CDRTs more than 72 hours warning time. Risk perception was raised by preceding threats from Hurricanes Irma and Jose. In the days before Hurricane Maria made landfall, CDRTs activated their members. They hosted several meetings to cross-check the availability of team members and remind them of their roles and responsibilities.

Designated CDRT members were tasked with real time monitoring of the storm and

sharing official warnings - until communications broke down. The team secured keys and access to local churches, anticipating the need for emergency shelter.

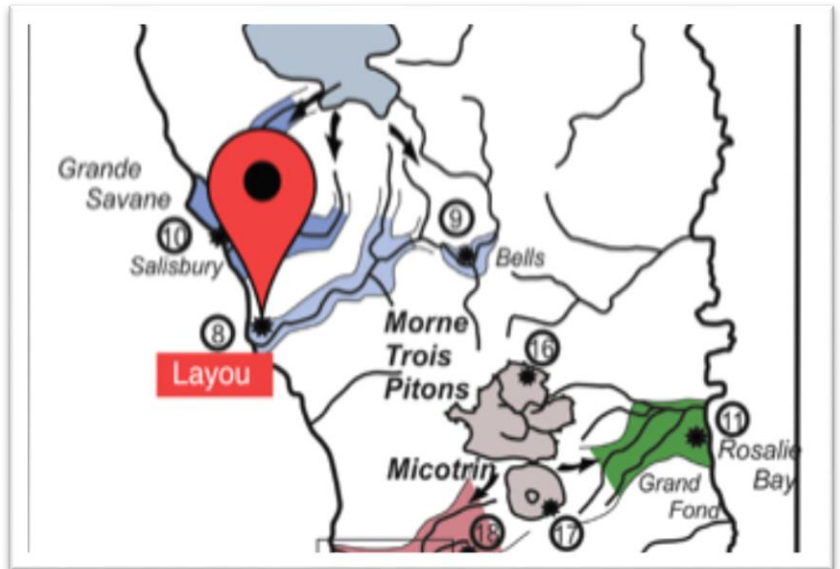
The CDRT performed as expected. They verified and recorded what supplies were available, confirmed transportation arrangements and identified the vulnerable persons in the community who might need shelter arrangements.

After the hurricane passed the team conducted search and rescue activities, successfully evacuating 67 persons and provided transportation for persons to get safely to shelters, which they helped to manage. Some team members conducted household damage assessments and needs analysis (DANA) as well as beneficiary identification. As such the CDRT was able to assist government agencies and donors with information quickly when communications were restored. Other CDRT members took to road clearance as well as to providing psychosocial support to neighbours.

## Challenges and effective response

There was a recognizable difference in the CDRT response to TS Erika versus Hurricane Maria. This was due to the unexpected force of Hurricane Maria. Many CDRT teams were on alert but communications failure throughout the island made it difficult to coordinate the response as effectively as was seen after TS Erika.

The uncertainty of many as to the growing force of Hurricane Maria and the rapid shift from a category strength of 2 to a Cat. 5 left many CDRT members vulnerable and impacted negatively by the event.



Map of Dominica, with pointer showcasing the Layou community.

However, lessons learnt from TS Erika made some key activities the core of the response mechanisms; particularly the preparations accomplished due to the early warning of Hurricane Maria.

Common issues shared that affected response activities were:

- ◆ Difficulties in communicating with teams due to the national telecommunications breakdown and a lack of emergency radio equipment and massive destruction to communication networks
- ◆ Poor storage facilities for existing equipment and improper maintenance policies
- ◆ A lack of equipment for search and rescue operations, as well as First Aid needs
- ◆ Low motivation by some CDRTs to engage post-training and to conduct preparedness activities. Generally, it was the women who attended interim continuity meetings. Post-impact the men volunteered for the route clearance tasks.
- ◆ Lack of sensitization of community members regarding the distribution of relief items, to manage expectations of assistance.

**“There is nothing as fulfilling as helping people in your community and country at large, and disasters will increase in frequency on a daily basis....and persons who are availing themselves to help in disasters have to ensure they are committed and work on integrity.”**

*Interviewee  
Dale Laurent*

## Lessons

CDRTs were recognized in Dominica as an invaluable resource to collecting damage and needs data, providing core damage assessment and impact data to government and non-governmental organisations.

DANA refresher training and accessibility to the forms as well as digital DANA smart phone survey apps are useful for preparedness.

The national hurricane early warning system gave CDRTs time to effectively prepare. Community EWS should be similarly useful for localized events.

A balanced CDRT's recruitment, regarding the sexes, is desirable given the gender preferences to CDRT tasks. This mix will allow members a variety of opportunities to select the tasks with which they are most comfortable. Essential are those members inclined to meet and administer to sustain the team post-training/pre-event. It is also important to engage others who may prefer skilled and semi-skilled physical actions.

Access to emergency telecommunications is essential when national systems fail. In Dominica amateur radio filled the gap.

Leadership that regularly engages and is familiar to CDRT members is important to maintain interests and the various skill sets learnt during trainings. Otherwise, as happened in other groups, confidence and coordination breaks down. The resultant lack of preparations and the general mistrust hampers the response.

The comradery experienced in Dominica with CDRTs and community members can only be nurtured by encouraging consistent engagement.

CDRTs noted that, while not ideal, the storage of equipment by a trusted member seemed more functional than an isolated storage room where accessing the key in times of emergency could be difficult.



## Forward thinking and ideas for sustainability

Where risk awareness is not maintained by recent impacts or threats e.g. TS Erika, creative ways should be found to sustain the community's preparedness interest.

Drills and exercises were identified as the most common activity to build a fluid understanding of roles and responsibilities in CDRTs.

In partnership with other national disaster preparedness agencies, opportunities for CDRT to sustain interest, through regular drills and exercises, should be developed and supported.

The CDRT mechanism could be integrated as part of the IFRC [Community Resilience program](#) – knowledgeable and healthy, cohesive, networked communities. CDRTs can also be integrated into other local projects/programs which manage the community's natural assets, provide livelihood opportunities. Such efforts should engage youth groups into the CDRT network.

IFRC's CADRIM will update its online the *Sustainability Guide* for CDRTs. This is to encourage maintenance of the core pillars for sustainability for the CDRT structure and leadership.

In conclusion, the CDRT methodology is a strong operational tool pre and post-emergency, as proven from Dominica's past impacts. However, lessons learnt have shown that leadership, regular engagement and practice, early warning, proper equipment and prepositioning of action teams with clear understanding of roles are imperative to effective response and sustainability.



Create an inclusive CDRT, where members are pre-identified, contact information confirmed and a reliable communication call tree is established and tested



Developing a strong communication plan with updated contacts, practiced through regular drills and exercises



Keep updated the mapping of the community's risks; hazard impacts, the vulnerable as well as the community's capacities, resources and network



Link CDRTs into the community's resilience plan and the national as well as community's early warning systems

## Replication Checklist

Ten (10) steps to replicating a sustainable CDRT:

1. Develop and train a CDRT team with dedicated leadership, integrated into the community's resilience program.
2. Promote inclusion. A balanced CDRT recruitment, regarding the sexes and differing age groups, is recommended given the gender preferences and the skill sets of CDRT tasks. Encourage community members who are resourceful and committed to participate.
3. Create an environment which builds social and technical networking among CDRTs and the community in the quiet period.
4. Link CDRTs into the national and community early warning system
5. Set up more than one mode of communicating with team members, such as a *WhatsApp* group, links on the community's *Facebook* page or wireless radios. Where necessary create partnerships with emergency communications resources in the area. Establish and regularly test communications with municipal/national disaster authorities.
6. Ensure readiness. Conduct regular drills, exercises and simulations within their community (and where possible, with the municipal/national disaster agencies), so that CDRT members know their roles and community members are more aware of this resource.
7. Ensure CDRTs advocate for and host regular training opportunities/refreshers to build capacities. For example, refresher trainings on DANA and the provision of pre-printed DANA forms and or smart phone apps for emergency use.
8. Maintain a call-tree with updated contacts and list of vulnerable persons in the community so that quick mobilization to special groups can be made easier.
9. Establish, monitor and maintain a CDRT kit for search and rescue, first aid, personal protection etc.
10. Sensitize CDRTs and community members on relief distribution ahead of emergencies and ensure there is a

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