

Caribbean hurricane season 'will be different this time'

In September 2017 two category five hurricanes swept across the Caribbean, devastating island communities in the region. In the 2nd part of this special report marking the one year anniversary of hurricanes Irma and Maria hitting the Caribbean, UN News looks at how the UN has responded, helping communities to get back on their feet, and preparing them for the inevitability of more damaging hurricanes in the future.

Ahijah Williams, 15, has been taking disaster risk reduction training at school in Dominica ahead of the 2018 hurricane season. UNICEF Eastern Caribbean

15 year old Ahijah Williams is terrified by the idea of another hurricane season.

He is a student at North East Comprehensive School in Wesley, Dominica. He remembers how he felt when Hurricane Maria, a devastating Category 5 storm, ripped through his community 12 months ago.

"I was extremely horrified to hear those winds howling like wolves in the sky and houses flying away and people dying."

Although fearful of the dangers that the 2018 hurricane season could bring, he says he "would like to be more ready this time: prepare for the season, stock up on food, repair houses."

Dominica has been rebuilding its education system in the aftermath of Maria and preparing for the coming hurricane season. The European Commission provided the [UN Children's Fund](#), [UNICEF](#) – working with the Government of Dominica and IsraAID – with 500,000 euros to support the education sector across all 72 schools

The rebuilding has not just been taking place in the physical sense, but also in terms of preparing teachers and students to respond appropriately during a natural disaster like a hurricane.

Children evacuated from Barbuda during the 2017 hurricane season in the Caribbean received educational and recreational supplies from the UN Children's Fund. UNICEF/Manuel Moreno

"I want to learn how to prepare for a hurricane and what we do after a hurricane. It is my responsibility to help as a member of the Dominica Cadet Corps," says Ahijah. "I am looking forward to learning safe practices. It's going to be different this time"

UNICEF also launched a “Return to Happiness” programme for the thousands of children affected by the hurricanes, helping them to work through their trauma using play, writing, drama and poetry.

Hurricane readiness

The people of Dominica are not alone. Across the islands of the eastern Caribbean, citizens, communities and governments are developing ways to improve their hurricane readiness.

And the UN is playing a major part in helping them to become more resilient, and better able to withstand the next season, as extreme weather events grow in frequency and scale.

The eastern Caribbean islands are no stranger to life-threatening weather conditions. The UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean ([ECLAC](#)) has identified the region as the second most hazard-prone in the world (after the Asia-Pacific region).

As well as hurricanes, inhabitants face threats such as floods and volcanoes, with regular annual losses from disasters estimated at \$3 billion per year. In its [2018 Caribbean Outlook report](#), ECLAC recommended that governments in the region improve resilience by undertaking recovery and reconstruction assessments.

Many families in Dominica lost everything they owned as a result of the hurricanes that struck the island in 2017. UNICEF/Manuel Moreno

Following the back-to-back batterings from Irma and Maria, Dominica has taken this message on-board. Shortly after the hurricanes, Dominican Prime Minister Roosevelt Skerrit said: “Our devastation is so complete that our recovery has to be total, and so we have a unique opportunity to be an example to the world, an example of how an entire nation rebounds from disaster and how an entire nation can be climate resilient for the future.”

To reach this goal, the Dominican Government created a task-force to determine best practice across every sector and enforce new disaster mitigation measures throughout the island.

The UN played an important role and, even in the very early days of the humanitarian recovery efforts, started planning for resilience.

The UN Development Programme, [UNDP](#), restored over 800 buildings for the most at-need people in Dominica and Antigua & Barbuda, trained hurricane-affected Dominicans to rebuild their own communities, and ensured that roofs were put up in accordance with improved building codes.

In addition, the UNDP looked at existing building standards and, where necessary, reviewed them and raised them to bolster resilience. The aim is to enable Dominica to rebound from a Category 5 storm in a matter of weeks, rather than months or years.

UN disaster risk reduction

Adhering to building standards are key to improving the resilience of buildings in hurricane conditions. UNDP/Zaimis Olmos

Raúl Salazar, Head of the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction ([UNISDR](#)) for the Americas and The Caribbean says that preparedness in the region has improved over the last year: “With the contribution of the international community and cooperation among countries of the region, the affected islands have initiated a process of ‘risk informed’ recovery in sectors as diverse as education; with a safe schools perspective, where schools are able to resist the impact of hurricanes; tourism, with a strong engagement of the private sector to re-establish services; and the building of national disaster risk reduction plans.”

However, one of the big fears for the coming years, according to Raúl Salazar, is the unpredictability brought about by climate change: “Through changing temperatures, precipitation and sea levels, amongst other factors, global climate change is already modifying hazard levels and exacerbating disaster risks,” he said, adding that “climate change will contribute an additional \$1.4 billion to the expected annual losses from cyclone wind damage alone.”

Raúl Salazar’s concerns are echoed in the 2018 ECLAC Caribbean Outlook report, which predicts that “disaster-related costs are expected to escalate in the Caribbean in the face of population growth, rapid urbanization, increased exposure of assets and climate-change-related damage.”

UN [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) surveys the devastation in Barbuda caused by two category 5 hurricanes which swept across the Caribbean in September 2017.

UN Photo/Rick Bajornas

For the UN Secretary-General, Antoniό Guterres, climate change remains an overriding factor in the devastation wreaked by hurricanes Irma and Maria. Speaking on a visit to Dominica and Barbuda shortly after the hurricane struck, he said: [“the intensity of hurricanes in the Caribbean in this season is not an accident. It is the result of climate change.”](#)

As more and more countries are affected, and the associated costs, human and financial, continue to rise the international community is moving towards meaningful action.

In 2015, the [Paris Agreement](#) was signed, committing all countries to undertake ambitious efforts to combat climate change. And, because reducing carbon emissions is no longer enough to halt climate change, States agreed to a [“Global Adaptation Goal”](#), strengthening the ability of the most vulnerable countries to deal with its effects.

For more on Dominica’s “war” on climate change click [here](#):

One of the crueller ironies of climate change is that, whilst they contribute less than 1 per cent to total greenhouse gas emissions, the [Small Island Developing States](#) tend to suffer disproportionately from its effects: just weeks after the hurricanes devastated his nation, Dominican Prime Minister, Roosevelt Skerrit, in an emotional [address](#), told the UN General Assembly:

“The stars have fallen, Eden is broken... We as a country, and as a region, did not start this war against nature. We did not provoke it. The war has come to us!”