



ORGANISATION OF EASTERN CARIBBEAN STATES

Environment and Sustainable Development Unit

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NEWS RELEASE

REMARKS BY DR. LEN ISHMAEL, DIRECTOR GENERAL, OECS SECRETARIAT AT THE OPENING OF THE REGIONAL WORKSHOP AND LAUNCH OF THE VULNERABILITY BENCHMARKING TOOL (BTOOL) TUESDAY, MARCH 4, 2008, ROYAL ST. LUCIAN HOTEL

Mr. Chairman, Hon. Minister, Members of the Diplomatic Corp, Government Officials, Representatives from USAID and other regional organizations, Distinguished delegations, specially invited guests, members of the media, my colleagues from the OECS Secretariat, it is a real pleasure for me to be here with you today as we prepare to launch an important tool in the ability of OECS Member States to both reduce their vulnerability and increase their resilience to natural catastrophic events.

In attempting to respond to the challenges of the future within the OECS region, the *Development Charter* of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), and the St. George's Declaration recognise that, as Small Island Development States OECS countries are especially vulnerable to external economic shocks and natural disasters. Indeed, small size and limited resources form natural constraints to the ability of Member States to cope with the effects of these physical and global phenomena. As a result of the intensity and increased frequency of extreme weather systems within the last few years, the ability of national and regional disaster preparedness and response agencies and Governments to respond to the impacts of these events has been severely tested. If the Grenada experiences with Hurricanes Ivan and Emily are anything to go by, then it can possibly be extrapolated that the entire OECS region is ill prepared to dealing with the short, medium and long term impacts of severe weather events such as these.

The most intense and damaging system in the Caribbean in 2004 was Hurricane Ivan, which attained Category 5 Status, killed 16 people and damaged 90% of homes in Grenada; total damages were estimated at \$2.4 billion or 201% of GDP. This figure is staggering when compared to the productive capacity of that Member State or indeed of all our Member States. In 2005, we witnessed yet again the damage caused by Hurricane Emily to Grenada. Although only the northern part of the island and Carriacou were critically affected, total damage was estimated at \$141 million or 13% of GDP. We still remember vividly the scenes of destruction, the dazed expressions of persons standing in the midst of the destruction, the loss of life and livelihoods, the damage to the environment, and the struggles to rebuild lives and the social and economic capacity of that country. We cannot begin to imagine the mental anguish of those who were and still remain traumatized by such an event.



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Of course still fresh in our memories is **Hurricane Dean** which is recorded as the most intense [Atlantic hurricane](#) since [Hurricane Wilma](#) of [2005](#), and tied for seventh most intense Atlantic hurricane ever recorded as well as the third most intense Atlantic hurricane ever at landfall. Many of the operations of the OECS Secretariat are still displaced as a consequence of the damage caused by Dean to the roof and internal infrastructure of the main Secretariat building. In addition, the unforgettable 7.4 magnitude November 2007 earthquake is also added to the list of unforgettable events in our history of severe natural events in this region. The consequences of natural disasters on economic activity, property, human welfare, and natural resources are devastating. All of these events have greatly affected the productive sectors of the economy, not to mention the impact on the social infrastructure and communities, particularly the poor. These images are etched in our minds and serve as hard lessons for all of us. Are they to be repeated time and time again before we take note and address the inherent issues?

With increasing frequency, OECS Member States are facing situations in which scarce resources that were earmarked for development projects have to be diverted to relief and reconstruction following disasters, thus setting back economic growth. Recent experiences confirm that economic recovery from a major natural disaster is agonizingly slow. While countries look to international lending institutions and bilateral donor agencies for help with recovery from disasters, rarely do funds received offset the losses incurred.

Experiences in the Eastern Caribbean clearly show that disasters associated with natural events are fundamentally an issue of development. Each natural disaster leaves in its wake overwhelming evidence of how poor planning and investment decisions contribute to vulnerability and increase the risk of future disasters. Vulnerability is intimately associated with social processes in disaster prone areas. Moreover, it is also clear that a close link exists between the recovery from natural disasters and poverty, with low-income populations and communities being disproportionately affected by natural hazards. Limited resources, skewed land ownership and tenure issues drive the poor to settle on marginal areas usually in a pattern of settlement that heightens vulnerability and increases the risk from disasters. Sectoral planning, resource allocation and land use decisions must therefore give special attention to the risk profile of our Member States.

Cognisant of this vulnerability to, and impacts of natural disasters on the OECS region, the OECS Secretariat developed and continues to implement its disaster response and risk reduction portfolio. The OECS disaster management agenda which was developed in collaboration with a number of regional and international development partners is closely aligned with and is acknowledged as an essential component of the Comprehensive Disaster Management (CDM) Framework coordinated by the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Response Agency (CDERA). We graciously



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acknowledge the contribution of development partners and agencies in the construction of the Disaster Response and Risk Reduction Agenda of the OECS Secretariat. Global and regional experiences, best practices and lessons learnt serve as vehicles for consolidating and aligning our disaster management approaches with emerging challenges of these types of events.

The consolidation of the OECS Disaster Management portfolio is further advanced with the support of the United States Government through its Agency for International Development and its Caribbean Open Trade Support Programme. In September 2005, the OECS Secretariat signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) committing both organisations to providing technical assistance to Member States in the design and implementation of Disaster Response and Risk Reduction Programmes.

One significant output of the OECS/USAID COTS partnership is the Disaster Risk Management Benchmarking Tool, otherwise known as the Vulnerability Benchmarking Tool or more simply the BTool. The development of this instrument was a response to the recognition that there was no specific action agenda directed at achieving a measurable reduction in the region's disaster response risk profile. The tool itself is an integral part of a spectrum of activities designed to improve the ability of national governments, civil society organizations, and the private sector, to proactively plan and implement actions to reduce vulnerability to natural disasters and create greater economic resilience when they do occur. This instrument has been tested in the six independent Member States of the OECS region, refined and then applied to each participating country in a preliminary appraisal of their vulnerability profiles. The results of these country assessments have been submitted to the respective countries for their own internal evaluation and enhancement of their disaster risk management performance.

The partnership between the OECS and USAID focuses as well on the promotion of best practices in disaster risk management, facilitation of the adoption of appropriate policy formulation for risk management and advancing in-country implementation of the BTool .

At the 46th meeting of the OECS Authority, Heads of Governments agreed to facilitate the national adoption of the BTool. This was also echoed by the Ministers of Environment, who at their policy meetings in 2006 and 2008 also endorsed the BTool and recommended its adoption. Some of our development partners have also recognised the utility of this instrument as an aid in determining strategic priorities for the region.

But we must develop a thorough understanding of this instrument and how it is intended to be used in advancing the framework in which disaster risk reduction is to be managed. This overriding objective of this workshop is to build national capacity to



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implement risk reduction strategies for potential disasters and multi hazards. The BTool publication which will be launched today, charts the path followed in the development of the instrument itself, outlines the procedures for vulnerability assessment and illustrates the scoring mechanisms in addition to providing useful information and references for disaster risk management. We can see therefore that the BTool is **not** only intended for disaster management organisations, but can be customized for use by every agency, sector, or business entity in support of sustainable planning and enhancement of sound investment strategies.

It we are to secure the full benefits of this instrument, it would have to be mainstreamed into the operational portfolio of public and private sector agencies, and our tasks are not complete until that is achieved. Workshop delegates are entrusted with this, as your mission on return to your individual countries. Our very recent experiences with natural events dictate a course of action that cannot be informed by a business as usual approach. I must therefore charge you with the significantly important task of seeing the integration of this instrument into our every day programmes with the utmost urgency.

Before concluding however, I must express congratulations to my staff within the Secretariat's Environment and Sustainable Development Unit (ESDU), USAID and the COTS team for their sterling contributions to this very important area of disaster risk reduction within our Member States. I wish also to congratulate the authors of the BTool, Dr. Jacob Opadeyi and Dr. Balfour Spence, who seized the challenge, remaining undaunted throughout the process. The ultimate test of success is in the ready acceptance and endorsement of the BTool by the Governments and people for whom it is developed.

Delegates, I am confident that this training session will accelerate the development and application of the tool, and I sincerely hope that the training sessions will provide you with what is required to secure the national and regional application and follow up activities of this vulnerability assessment tool so vital in our attempt to reduce the vulnerability and build the resilience of our Member States to natural catastrophic events.

I thank you.