



Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA)
Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean, San Jose, Costa Rica

DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

DRR in the Americas Program Engages Region's Universities

A unique disaster risk reduction (DRR) program implemented by Florida International University (FIU) with funding from USAID/OFDA is engaging universities throughout Latin America in DRR efforts.

Through the program, 25 university professors recently completed an online graduate-level disaster risk management course provided by the Universidad Politécnica de Cataluña - International Center for Numerical Methods in Engineering (CIMNE).

In September, as part of this program, students who successfully completed the course will participate in a field visit, or *pasantía*, to the city of Manizales, Colombia, to observe a living urban laboratory in which community leaders, city officials, and staff from the National University of Colombia, Manizales campus, work together to reduce multiple disaster risks and hazards.

Both the recent course and upcoming field visit are funded by USAID/OFDA through the FIU program "DRR in the Americas: Conceptualizing, Identifying, Analyzing, Stimulating, and Strengthening Transferable DRR Methods."

Two previous course/field visit combinations were funded in 2006 and 2007 by the Paul C. Bell Disaster Risk Management Initiative, another program implemented by FIU with USAID/OFDA funding (see article on page 2).

The e-learning/e-training CIMNE course takes two and a half months to complete and is particularly noteworthy



Photo courtesy of Florida International University

Program Co-Director Juan Pablo Sarmiento (right) makes a point about disaster risk management to Cristina Eguizabal, Director of the Latin American and Caribbean Center at FIU, and Program Director Richard Olson, at the program's launch in October 2008.

because of its extended geographic reach and pedagogic efficiency. Professors from universities in Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Panama,

Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela have taken the course, which includes two separate subjects: Theory of Risk and Disasters, and Collective Risk Management.

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University of Chile Project Assists Populations Displaced by Volcanic Eruption



Photo by Andy Lockhart, OFDA-USGS VDAP team

Lahars from the eruption flooded the eastern edge of Chaitén town.

Researchers from the University of Chile are studying the displacement resulting from last year's eruption of Chaitén Volcano, and evaluating the risks involved in relocating the town of Chaitén.

All of the estimated 5,000 inhabitants were evacuated soon after the volcano began erupting for the first time in recorded history in May 2008. At the time, officials considered the evacuation to be temporary, but a year later, the town remains empty as volcanic activity continues.

Meanwhile, many former inhabitants are

struggling with problems related to housing, employment, and lifestyle change, and desire to return to Chaitén or a similar rural coastal environment. The government has proposed moving the town 10 km south to Santa Barbara.

As part of a project funded by USAID/OFDA through the FIU DRR in the Americas program, Chilean researchers are analyzing the displaced population, evaluating the area proposed for relocation, and working to reduce associated risks.

DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

USAID/OFDA Strengthens DRR in Region Through Two Distinctive FIU Programs

USAID/OFDA is helping to promote practical and effective DRR work at a community level carried out by universities in Latin America and the Caribbean under two FIU programs.

The first, the Paul C. Bell, Jr., Disaster Risk Management Program, was started six years ago in honor of disaster risk management expert Paul C. Bell, Jr., who founded the USAID/OFDA Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) and was its senior regional advisor until he passed away in 2003.

Earlier this year, as part of Phase IV of the Bell Program, six universities in Costa Rica, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Peru received small grants to carry out community DRR projects. Projects are already underway in Costa Rica (see article at right) and El Salvador, and will soon begin in the other countries. As part of the next phase of the Bell Program, FIU professors Richard Olson and Juan Pablo Sarmiento are working to establish three-year "Bell Scholarships" for selected individuals committed to disaster management careers upon completion of their degree programs, and creating several "Bell Centers" at universities in the region to encourage and support applied research in risk analysis, hazards, and disasters related to building codes and urban planning processes.

The second program, "DRR in the Americas: Conceptualizing, Identifying, Analyzing, Stimulating, and Strengthening Transferable DRR Methods," began in late 2008. The five-year program expands and consolidates the underlying concepts of the Bell Program, and provides opportunities for key actors and stakeholders, including governmental, academic, and non-governmental groups, to come together to address vulnerabilities in the region. Among other objectives, the project intends to promote and strengthen a dozen "communities of practice" whose members will focus on risk reduction themes.

In addition to providing scholarships for Latin American university professors to participate in an online DRR course followed by a field trip to Manizales, Colombia (see article on page 1), the DRR in the Americas program is working to produce a commented bibliography and documents on risk reduction and "communities of practice." The program has also assisted USAID/OFDA in evaluating potential opportunities for DRR programs in Haiti and in Kenya, and funded a research project in Chile (see article on page 1).

Participants Praise Online DRR Course

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Course participants are taught to evaluate risk and vulnerability from a multidisciplinary, interinstitutional, and multisectoral perspective, treating risk as a cross-cutting theme in developmental processes. Participants praised the course, which was designed and is taught by Colombian professor Omar Darío Cardona and Spanish professor Alex H. Barbat.

"Without a doubt, this course will help me better manage all aspects required to develop integral risk management programs. The course's debate space was very interesting and enriching, as it allowed students to not only clarify questions and exchange viewpoints, but also served as self-evaluation. This course will contribute to my work at the university, helping to form future professionals and colleagues with improved knowledge and criteria," said María Cad, a professor at Cuyo National University in Argentina.

Any Gonzalez, a risk management consultant and professor at the University of Costa Rica's School of Geology, said the course will allow her "to transmit knowledge and apply new teaching strategies that exceed traditional methods and promote leadership, teamwork, and the incorporation of integral strategic disaster risk management into the culture. This will foment the sustainable development of communities, regions and the country in general."

DISASTER RISK REDUCTION



Photo by Elena Badilla, University of Costa Rica

Participants in the University of Costa Rica workshop on community risk reduction work together to map out collective perceptions of risk in the local area.

Costa Rica Project Examines Risk Perceptions

A University of Costa Rica (UCR) project to improve community awareness and prevention of disaster risks commenced in July thanks to a small grant from the USAID/OFDA-funded Paul C. Bell initiative implemented by FIU.

The project, carried out by the UCR School of Geology, will provide several vulnerable communities in Alajuela, Cartago, and San Jose provinces practical geological information to improve knowledge of natural and manmade risk factors in the community. Additionally, the project is designed to improve community knowledge of water resource management and will place special emphasis on gender awareness when carrying out the project.

One of the project's first activities was a workshop on community risk perception held July 1 in San Isidro de Alajuela. Approximately 30 members of the community, mostly women, participated in the workshop led by UCR researchers Mario Arias, Elena Badilla, and Giovanni Peraldo.

During the workshop, participants discussed the area's water resources, threats facing these resources, and the disaster risks associated with the resources. Following this discussion, participants worked to create maps illustrating their individual perceptions of potentially dangerous areas in the community due to these risks, as well as the areas they considered safe for emergency evacuations or meetings. Participants later worked in groups to incorporate their ideas into maps illustrating collective risk perceptions.

On July 29, the workshop attendees participated in a field trip to the vulnerable mapped areas, to further discuss these risks and ways to reduce them.

Similar workshops are anticipated in at least four other communities, including some that were affected by landslides as a result of the magnitude 6.2 earthquake that struck Costa Rica on January 8. The community of San Isidro has also requested that the project work with students at the local La Laguna Elementary School.

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