ACURIL 2011: The Role of Libraries and Archives in Disaster Preparedness, Response and Research

Jun 3rd, 9:00 AM - 10:00 AM

The Caribbean Disaster Information Network

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Caribbean Disaster Information Network – A Free Access Resource

Beverley Lashley

Abstract

Through initial funding from the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) in June 1999, CARDIN (Caribbean Disaster Information Network) was established with the major objective of strengthening the capacity within the Caribbean Community for the collection, indexing, dissemination and use of disaster-related information while serving as a sub-regional disaster information centre. The presentation will focus on how the major players within the Caribbean disaster community have collaborated to form CARDIN – a multidimensional network and its accomplishments over the years of fulfilling its mandate of providing free access to Caribbean disaster resources.
The Caribbean – Against the Odds

The Caribbean islands form a broad arc that extends for approximately 4,000 km north to south from Florida (U.S.A.) to Venezuela. The size of the islands vary, based on the *The World Factbook 2011*, Anguilla has 91 square km and has a population of 15,094 (July 2011 est.) when compared to Cuba which has 110,860 square km and has 11,087,330 (July 2001 est.) inhabitants. All these islands share a tropical climate.

The region, however has been plagued with natural hazards of which all types exist in the Caribbean. The most common being the geological and hydrometeorological. The geological hazards include earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanoes and landslides while the hydrometeorological hazards include hurricanes, tropical storms, landslides, droughts and floods. However in the region the primary natural hazards, are those caused by hurricanes and floods rather than earthquakes. The Atlantic Oceanographic and Meteorological Laboratory has recorded that between 1886 – 2005 approximately 1,519 tropical storms and 932 hurricanes have been recorded in the North Atlantic. What is noticeable is that the frequency with which hurricanes affect any one island is low resulting in a lack of consciousness among the population as to the real risks to their own lives and property.

All the islands are vulnerable to the effects of natural hazards but the seriousness of each impact is affected by the levels of physical and socio-economic factors of each island at the time of impact.

Hurricane David (September 1979) caused great devastation to Dominica which left 80% of the population homeless. Many considered this the turning point as Caribbean nationals began taking the matter of disaster management more seriously. More recent hurricanes that have affected the region include Ivan (2004) which caused 124 deaths
throughout the Caribbean and the Eastern United States. In August 2008 Gustav caused extensive damage of over 6.62 billion US dollars to the Cayman Islands, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Jamaica and sections of the USA.

**Disaster Preparedness and Response Mechanism**

Most countries in the Caribbean have government agencies that have the responsibility of coordinating the activities of disaster preparedness and management – before, during and after such events. However since hurricanes are low frequency events it has been a difficult task to persuade policy makers to consider disaster management as a high priority. Since a hurricane may occur once in fifty years, and most Caribbean governments have a maximum life span of five years before elections become due, it is hard to get governments to consider hurricanes as a real priority.

Some governments have adopted mandatory building codes as a response mechanism while others take an ad hoc approach to building. The assumption here is that the builders and developers would in fact meet the correct building standards. However it was as a result of Hurricane David (1979) that the Pan-Caribbean Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Programme (PCDPPP) based in Antigua as a regional initiative was established. The project contrived the development of a specialized group of professionals who recognized the need for a Caribbean commitment to regional disaster management.

In 1991 the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Response Agency (CDERA) was formed by an Agreement of Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) The main function of this agency was to provide an “immediate and coordinated response” to any disastrous event which has affected any Participating State. On September 1, 2009
CDERA was transformed to CDEMA. The Caribbean Disaster and Emergency Management Agency’s website highlights that they “fully embrace the principles and practice of Comprehensive Disaster Management (CDM) which is an integrated and proactive approach to disaster management”. Presently there are eighteen (18) Participating States covered by CDEMA.

In the Caribbean many regional and international agencies such as the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) have supported local efforts through the implementation of new programmes and the development of new policies.

**Disaster Documentation Centres in the Caribbean – early initiatives**

The San José Disaster Documentation Centre (CDD) was formed in 1990 by the PAHO/WHO with support from the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR) now the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR) and the Costa Rica National Emergency Committee. By 1997 six organizations sponsored the creation of the Regional Disaster Information Centre (CRID) for Latin America and the Caribbean thus building on these early initiatives.

Caribbean disaster agencies are more concerned with their mandate of disaster relief and response. Therefore the information needs are often not seen as “core” to the work of these organizations. In fact apart from CARDIN, only the Office of Disaster Preparedness and Emergency Management in Jamaica and CDEMA have computerized databases on Caribbean disaster information.

**The DIPECHO Strategy**
The Disaster Preparedness Programme of the European Commission’s Humanitarian Aid Office (DIPECHO) has three principal types of action which includes the development of human resources and the strengthening of organizations and institutions and community-oriented pilot projects. The sub-programme funds disaster preparedness projects in countries outside of the European Union.

Under this sub-programme the First Action Plan for the Caribbean was initiated in 1998 followed by the second in 1999 that emphasized the importance of “establishing regional links and strengthening national and regional-based institutions”. DIPECHO recognized the need for utilizing synergies between the various disaster agencies both at the national and regional level. A proposal was submitted by the University of the West Indies (UWI) to ECHO and by June 1999 funds became available for the establishment of the Caribbean Disaster Information Network. ECHO provided funding for CARDIN up to 2004 and since then the UWI Mona Library. Other agencies such as CUSO have provided resource personnel and in recent years the Disaster Risk Reduction Centre at the UWI Mona Campus, Jamaica.

**The Experiences of the Caribbean Disaster Information Network**

The original idea of developing CARDIN as a node of the Regional Disaster Information Centre for Latin America and the Caribbean (CRID) gave way to a more Caribbean focussed Disaster Information Network providing linkages with Caribbean Disaster related organizations. CARDIN was formally established in June 1999 but its origins can be traced to a meeting in Jamaica in December of 1997 between the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR), the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and the University of the West Indies Main
Library at the Mona Campus. These early initiatives resulted in the formation of CARDIN as it known today. The activity of gathering disaster related information throughout the Caribbean region which is the main focus of CARDIN is of most recent development.

**Mission**

CARDIN’s mission is to develop a comprehensive database on disaster related information within the English, Spanish, Dutch and French speaking Caribbean with a view to providing wider access to and coverage of disaster information in the region.

The early development of the CARDIN database was accomplished as part of the Caribbean Disaster Mitigation Programme supported by USAID, OAS. Through funding from OAS the Unit for Disaster Studies, Department of Geography and Geology, UWI, Mona was able to collaborate with CARDIN in producing the Natural Hazards and Disaster database (NATHAZ). This database along with another in-house database at the Science Branch Library, UWI, Mona provided the nucleus for the CARDIN database.

The early success of the CARDIN project was made possible through the assistance, co-operation and expertise of Regional Disaster Information Centre for Latin America and the Caribbean (CRID), Disaster Preparedness Programme of ECHO (DIPECHO), Caribbean Disaster and Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA), PAHO, Office of Disaster Emergency and Preparedness in Jamaica, the Department of Geography and Geology and UWI, Mona Campus Library.

**Network Model**
A network model was established to accomplish this aim. The model as illustrated in Figure 1 demonstrates the structure of the network with the UWI Library as the hub. The UWI Library was selected as it is a regional institution and offers distance education to most of the Caribbean islands. Partners forming the nucleus of the network are identified as focal points on the basis of technical capability and expressed interest. All persons/organizations who have disaster related information can become members of the network by contacting the CARDIN Secretariat and initiating and maintaining a link with it.

Figure 1 – Network Model

The model is unique in that it incorporates all the language groups and involves the major players in Caribbean disaster management. The agencies involved with CARDIN include the Caribbean Disaster and Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA), the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) where the regional office is responsible for collection of records pertaining to the health sector across the Caribbean, the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRCS) representing National Societies within the Caribbean, the Université Antille Guyane (UAG) representing the French

CDEMA -Caribbean Disaster and Emergency Management Agency

CLAMED -The Center for Latin America Disaster Medicine

CRID -Regional Disaster Information Center for Latin America and the Caribbean

ISDR -The International Strategy for Disaster Reduction
Speaking Caribbean, the Center for Latin America Disaster Medicine (CLAMED) which is based in Cuba and within CARDIN is responsible for Cuba and the Dominican Republic.

**Bridging the gap in Caribbean Disaster Management**

The structure of CARDIN clearly illustrates the ability of the network to function effectively using limited resources. Each disaster agency brings its unique quality and operation to strengthen the network, CDEMA is able to organize the collections within its mandate to incorporate this information into the CARDIN database. PAHO can readily provide health data, CLAMED assist with training in the Spanish speaking Caribbean, the IFCRS assists in organizing seminars at the community level. It is these synergies which makes CARDIN able to achieve its goals and objectives.

The major goals of CARDIN have been tied into its services. Its goals are:

- To provide wider access to and coverage of disaster information in the region.
  
  This has been achieved through its website at
  
  [http://www.mona.uwi.edu/cardin/home.asp](http://www.mona.uwi.edu/cardin/home.asp)

- To create a database of disaster related information available on the Internet, CD’s and in print format which will provide an essential resource for policymakers, practitioners, researchers and the general public. In 2000 CARDIN’s bibliographic disaster database was made available on the internet. This was a great accomplishment during this period as most organization did not have online records. Through contacts with the Latin-American and Caribbean
Center on Health Sciences Information (BIREME) based in Brazil we were able to secure the software iah free of cost. This software makes the ISIS databases accessible on the internet.

- To facilitate the dissemination of disaster related information to the general Caribbean public on the internet, through the newsletter and document delivery services.
- To establish and maintain relationships with other agencies for effective coordination of disaster information activities within the region. A online directory of the main stakeholders in Caribbean disaster management was created as a resource tool.
- To create full text documents and scanned images on disaster related information making these available on the internet. In January 2006 CARDIN launched it’s Virtual Disaster Library. The virtual library is a collaborative effort between CARDIN, the Unit for Disaster Studies (UDS), Department of Geography and Geology, UWI and the Regional Disaster Information Center for Latin America and the Caribbean (CRID)
Challenges

Organization of Caribbean Disaster Documentation Centres

A key challenge for the future will be the organization of documentation centres in the Caribbean. This initiative will have to be addressed by the governments of each islands or agencies such as CDEMA or CARDIN who have already started this initiative in some countries. Funds have to be sought to devise responses to rise to this challenge. Once these collections have been organized the sharing of resources and the formation of structured document delivery services can be initiated and fee-based services where agencies repackage information which is then made available commercially can be introduced.
Development of a strategic plan

There is need to develop a strategic plan to improve the services with integrated information in the Caribbean. Such a plan should address the following concerns:

- Identifying who are our present users
- Identifying who are our potential users
- Identifying the information needs of government and non-government users
- Identifying disaster information sources which can be utilized for future development and economic growth
- Development of a marketing plan to make the public aware of the services being offered. This can be accomplished with the collaborative efforts of the Caribbean disaster agencies.

Government Advocacy

Winning the support of the Presidents and Ministers in the region will be another challenge. Most countries have now adopted a national policy, which recognize the importance of disaster reduction, but the significance of information and the need to manage this resource adequately is yet to be recognized and actively supported.

Training

In depth training will have to be a main focus of CARDIN. CARDIN has developed a Training Manual for its network participants but the challenge here is to provide continuous training. The proposal has been made for the development of “online training links” but disaster agencies will have to identify personnel and incorporate the information skills into the job descriptions of their workers.

Sustainability
The activities of CARDIN have provided the avenue for persons within the community to become self sufficient. Through its Public Education Programme persons are given hands on practice of finding Caribbean disaster information on the internet, exposure to in-depth training on disaster information management and to be equipped with computers and organized collections. What is lacking however is the long term funding to undertake extensive training to ensure that all the agencies are at an optimum functioning level. CARDIN will have to secure long term funding as well as reach a level of self sustainability where it can provide services to recoup the overhead cost for its functioning.

**Conclusion**

Education and the adoption of prevention measures can considerably alleviate the damage caused by natural disasters in the region. CARDIN is playing a pivotal role in disaster information by providing a centralized location for Caribbean disaster information. It is hoped that eventually more members will join the network as active and enthusiastic participants and CARDIN will become the "Resource Sea of the Caribbean" for disaster information.