case study

Risk Reduction in Havana's Costal Settlements: A Case Study from Cuba

Due to recurrent coastal floods, Cuban Civil Defense authorities, together with the Movement for Peace, Disarmament and Liberty (MPDL), decided to focus their work on local level risk management. A national hazard assessment had identified coastal floods as a serious problem for the socio-economic development of the country, with more than 80% of the total population, as well as important economic assets being located in coastal zones.

The Northern Coast of the City of Havana, where more than 80,000 people from 5 municipalities reside, is at particular risk. In the chronology of coastal floods from 1810 to 1997, there have been a total of 63 recorded events throughout Cuba, of which 27 affected the City of Havana. The floods in March 1993 were the most serious ones, causing economic loss and infrastructure damage of more than USD 1 billion.

In view of the high vulnerability of the coastal populations in Havana, the project 'Reduction of the Risks linked to Flooding of Coastal Settlements in the City of Havana' was developed by the Cuban Civil Defense Authorities and MPDL. The project was evaluated not long ago by UNDP as part of the Fourth DIPECHO Action Plan.

The Intervention

The project aimed to improve the quality of life of the population and the preservation of their socio-economic assets and gains through reducing flood risks in the settlements of the northern coast of the City of Havana.

Although the responsibility for disaster risk management resided with the municipal governments, a coordinated multi-sector and multi-institutional approach was favored in order to ensure consensus on the roles of all stakeholders involved, including the local population.

An assessment was undertaken in the concerned municipalities under the leadership of the Presidents of the 5 People's Assemblies, in their capacity as heads of the Civil Defense system. The assessment aimed at learning more about the municipalities' different levels of capacity in coastal disaster risk management. Following this capacity assessment, a number of activities were pursued in order to fill the gaps identified:

- Assessing hazard, vulnerability and risk from coastal floods in the 5 most affected municipalities of the northern coast of the city of Havana and geo-reference these.
- Strengthening the Early Warning System for extreme meteorological events (including coastal floods).
- Building disaster risk management capacity at the municipal level.
- Improving the response capacity of the local population, rescue brigades and Municipal Direction Posts.

Positive Impacts

The intervention was able to improve access to meteorological and Civil Defense information, as well as early warning information for municipalities, relevant institutions, and the local population via the internet and other communication channels. The Geographical Information System on disaster risks was instrumental for facilitating appropriate decision-making for development planning as well as disaster response in the face of extreme meteorological events.

Permanent Municipal Direction Posts were established in the 5 municipalities, with the responsibility (i) to activate the Early Warning System at the local level; (ii) to plan and manage the response in danger situations; and (iii) to foster the incorporation of risk analysis in development planning.

The risk assessment was factored into Municipal Development Plans, resulting in the implementation

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of risk reduction measures, as well as disaster response and preparedness planning exercises. Overall, the project substantially increased the safety and protection of the at-risk population and economic assets.

Lessons Learned

Although multi-sector and multi-institutional coordination, consultation and participation was a complex process, it was decisive for the development and implementation of local level risk management actions led by the highest municipal authority in collaboration with the local population.

The project applied technology which was well adapted to the local context guaranteeing the sustainability of all actions.

The improved access to information greatly facilitated decision-making processes in a decentralized manner.

Recommendations

The project's experiences should be further systematized and possibly replicated at the national and regional level.

Continued support should be provided to initiatives aimed at reducing the social, economic and environmental causes of disasters.

In particular local capacities for risk management need further strengthening so that local level priorities can be integrated into national policies. This will ensure that disaster reduction is well adapted to the social, cultural and economic realities ensuring sustainable development.

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