

Helping Young Jamaicans Prepare Their Communities for Disasters

The Caribbean is one of the most disaster-prone regions of the world. Tropical storms, earthquakes and volcanoes constantly threaten its communities, especially those that lack the resources to prepare and recover. Year after year, natural disasters threaten to erase residents' hard-earned progress.

The islands are also home to large populations of young people who lack jobs and opportunities. Many youths become involved in the crime and violence that plague their neighborhoods. Each time a natural disaster strikes, communities become more vulnerable, and opportunities further diminish for young people.

But what if the energy and creativity of at-risk youth could be channeled toward preparing their communities for disasters?

In some of the toughest neighborhoods of Kingston, Jamaica, the St. Patrick's Rangers, with support from Catholic Relief Services and the U.S. Agency for International Development's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, are discovering their potential and proving that young people can play a key role in reducing disaster risk.

RAISING AWARENESS AND TAKING ACTION

The Rangers, a voluntary youth club of about 120 members, formed four Youth Emergency Action Committees, or YEACs. CRS and its local partner the St. Patrick's Foundation, in close coordination with local government



Above: In some of Kingston's most vulnerable neighborhoods, the Rangers repaired and replaced roofs to help prepare homes for hurricanes. CRS Jamaica. Left: A Ranger shares his opinion at a meeting. Josh Tong/CRS.

agencies, trained these groups in a variety of areas. First, YEACs learned about disaster risk reduction, including hurricane and earthquake awareness and preparedness. Participants received training in first aid, shelter management, teamwork and community development.

The YEACs then developed strategies for raising community awareness about how to prepare for disasters. They wrote and performed skits, songs and dances, and they held contests. This “edutainment” approach—education plus entertainment—made it fun to teach and learn.

In each neighborhood, the Rangers undertook a vulnerability and capacity assessment to examine risks and resources. They learned that simple interventions can greatly increase the resiliency of households and communities. Then they organized their friends and neighbors for community disaster risk-reducing events. The Rangers replaced or reinforced leaky and unattached roofs, cleaned clogged drains and gullies and helped neighborhoods properly dispose of trash to keep drains from flooding. Ask the Rangers about hurricane-resilient construction and they’ll tell you about facial capping, fillets and an array of other techniques that they have learned—valuable knowledge and experiences that could set them on a path to jobs in their communities.

SAFER COMMUNITIES, EMPOWERED YOUTH

Involving youth in disaster risk reduction is creating a new generation of community-minded young people with the skills to engage in other development opportunities. As youth from neighboring communities have begun to work with one another, the barriers created by a culture of violence have begun to break down. “Most people from Seivwright don’t



Many of Kingston’s gullies are clogged with plants and garbage. Storms often cause the gullies to overflow, flooding entire neighborhoods. The Rangers hosted clean-up days to pick up trash and clear brush. CRS Jamaica.

want to go to Riverton,” participant Joy Stevens explained. “But when we’re in our Ranger T-shirts, we can go anywhere in Jamaica.” And the next time disaster strikes, these young people will be prepared to answer the call, equipped not only with new skill sets and a sense of commitment but also with firsthand knowledge of local communities and the trust of their neighbors.

As participant Denelia Davis suggested to the Fourth Annual Caribbean Conference on Comprehensive Disaster Management, “Adults can be stuck in their ways, while youth are by nature more open to new ideas and new ways of doing things.” They are also in a position to influence not only their friends and their families but also younger generations of children.

LOOKING AHEAD

In inner-city Kingston, the St. Patrick’s Foundation identified two potential problems—high numbers of at-risk youth and the need for disaster risk reduction—and turned them into an opportunity. These same problems exist in vulnerable communities around the world. The project has been such a success that CRS plans to expand the program not only to include more communities in Kingston but also to reach out to other islands in the Caribbean.



The Rangers participated in the National Solid Waste Management Authority’s clean-up campaign. One of the Rangers became the agency’s mascot, a green garbage bin named “Binny.” CRS Jamaica.