

## Chapter 6

# Nicaragua: The Efforts of CARE, the European Commission and the U.S. to Strengthen Local Capacity—A Case Study

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Nicaragua has a long and painful history of sudden-onset disasters precipitated by natural phenomena<sup>1</sup> that have devastated lives, particularly those of the poor and most vulnerable, and suffocated the country's economic and human development. 46 percent of the population is living under the poverty line of one U.S. dollar per day, and according to the World Bank, Nicaragua is one of the world's most disaster-prone countries, having suffered on average a major disaster every two years for the last century.<sup>2</sup> The situation has been compounded by recurring conflicts and poor governance. Additional threats including climate change, environmental degradation, improper use of resources and land planning continue to increase people's vulnerability to natural hazards. Yet, often it is not the magnitude of disasters, but their frequency that deteriorates the socio-economic situation of the affected population. The recurrence of disaster and prolonged problems in Nicaragua have also resulted in the extended presence of aid agencies, allowing for the establishment of longer-term relationships with local organizations and a greater contextual understanding and footing in society and communities.

Both the U.S., primarily through the U.S. Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) and the EU, through the European Community Humanitarian Aid department (DG ECHO), have aspired to support local capacity in disaster response and preparedness in Nicaragua. Both donors are present in the region, the European Commission through its Regional Delegation for Central America is based in Managua, Nicaragua and OFDA's Office for Latin America is in San José, Costa Rica. Furthermore, both donors have embraced the Priorities for Action of the Hyogo Framework "Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters"<sup>3</sup> and subscribed to the Principles of Good Humanitarian Donorship. This case study draws on the experience of CARE in Nicaragua with the U.S. and EU disaster preparedness programs—CAMI and DIPECHO—and the recent disaster response for Hurricane Felix in September 2007 in order to identify barriers and effective tools of the two humanitarian donors when trying to mainstream lessons about local capacity into humanitarian policy and practice.

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<sup>1</sup> Humanitarian disasters are often the result of the combination of natural phenomena, such as earthquakes or hurricanes, with "unnatural" factors, such as poor watershed management and land use, vulnerability and risk associated with high levels of poverty, etc.

<sup>2</sup> World Bank, "Nicaragua Hurricane Felix Emergency Recovery Project," Report No. AB3659, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> The 5 priorities for action, extensively based on lessons learned from disasters, are: 1. Ensure that disaster risk reduction is a national and a local priority with a strong institutional basis for implementation; 2. Identify, assess and monitor disaster risks and enhance early warning; 3. Use knowledge, innovation and education to build a culture of safety and resilience at all levels; 4. Reduce the underlying risk factors; 5. Strengthen disaster preparedness for effective response at all levels.

## Local Capacity and Humanitarian Response in Nicaragua

In addressing the issue of local capacity and humanitarian performance in Nicaragua, several characteristics should be taken into account:

- Local actors have varying levels of capacity and vulnerability as well as shifting commitments to disaster risk reduction.
- Local actors are dependent on external aid and budget support.
- The country is characterized by political division, politicization and migration.
- Besides these important differences within the country there is also a regional divide between the Pacific and the Atlantic areas of Nicaragua.

### *Irregular Levels of Capacity and Vulnerability and Shifting Commitment to Disaster Risk Reduction*

In the wake of Hurricane Mitch in 1998,<sup>4</sup> the country established a National System for Disaster Prevention, Mitigation, and Assistance (SINAPRED), which is coordinated by an autonomous Executive Secretariat comprised of government actors and non governmental representatives. Organized in a decentralized fashion, the Secretariat is supposed to cover prevention, mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery. Prior to the creation of the system, civil defense, linked to the armed forces, was responsible for logistical and response matters while the National Institute for Territorial Studies (INETER) covered hazard monitoring and research, land use and territorial planning matters. These two institutions continue to play a major role in the newly established system. Nonetheless, developing local capacity in disaster preparedness is not a strategic priority for many of the national authorities and efforts to this end still greatly depend on international donor financing, questioning their longer-term sustainability.

SINAPRED's initial budget has been less than €500,000 per year on average, but in the face of the damage caused by Hurricane Felix in 2007, the National Assembly increased SINAPRED's budget by €3.5 million.<sup>5</sup> Part of this amount was allocated to programs run in cooperation with different national ministries and institutions responsible for reconstruction and rehabilitation of affected areas in the North Atlantic Autonomous Region. The substantial increase was maintained the following year.

Local emergency committees (COLOPRED) and municipalities often lack the infrastructure and equipment required to manage disaster response. Many communities and local institutions lack awareness, knowledge, expertise, resources and the mandate to manage disaster

<sup>4</sup> In October 1998, Hurricane Mitch swept through Nicaragua with sustained winds of 112 kilometres per hour, causing devastating floods and mudslides, massive infrastructure and property destruction, and significant population displacement. 867,752 were people directly or indirectly affected. 3,045 people died, 50,000 homes were completely destroyed and 94,000 homes were partially damaged. Nicaragua's central bank estimated losses at \$1.5 billion, not including losses in the agricultural sector or environmental impact

<sup>5</sup> ECHO Fifth Action Plan.

response. Finally, despite recognition of the need, efforts to systematically integrate disaster risk reduction into development efforts are lagging.

On the positive side, Nicaragua, like much of Latin America, has a long tradition of participatory processes and the country gained a great deal of experience in community organization with the Sandinista movement.<sup>6</sup>

### *Dependence on External Aid and Budget Support*

Nicaragua has been a top recipient of foreign aid in the past two decades. Under the previous government its economy showed signs of improvement, but Nicaragua continues to be dependent on aid.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Felix, the government argued that it had no funds with which to respond to existing or new needs, given the constraints of its budget, debt repayment requirements, and the conditionality imposed by the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and many traditional donors. Donors are principally involved in the provision of development aid to Nicaragua through budgetary support. However, the current government's relationship with traditional donors is strained and budget support is regarded as providing less leverage for promoting donor policies, including building local capacity and effective disaster risk reduction.

### *Political Divide, Politicization and Migration in Nicaragua*

Given its history, it is not surprising that Nicaragua remains politically polarized despite recent right-left party coalitions. While humanitarian action is meant to be impartial, independent and neutral, disasters, particularly sudden disasters, provide opportunities for political grandstanding and clientelism. As a result, critique has surfaced about the government's preparedness and disaster relief policies. The process of providing aid becomes highly politicized as authorities, both at the national and local levels, use aid to further their personal image and party interests. Efforts conducive to risk management are overshadowed by immediate concerns. NGOs tend to play a key role in the provision of relief efforts and community capacity building, but collaboration with the national government remains unlikely.

With each election, the hard earned technical capacities at the national and municipal levels are put at risk. A change in political party in municipalities implies that all personnel, even the most functional positions, are replaced. Additionally, migration is common at the community level, and thus positions in the local emergency committees and capabilities of community members are oftentimes lost to migration. Consequently, learning from training and experience is lost and efforts towards strengthening capacities are not sustainable.

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<sup>6</sup> The term 'sandinista' comes from the struggle of Augusto César Sandino resisting military occupation of Nicaragua by the U.S. Marines during the 1930s.

### *Country Differences and Regional Divide*

An important characteristic of Nicaragua is the vast differences in capacity, levels of development and culture between the Pacific and the Atlantic regions. The effects of Hurricane Felix exemplified these differences. It primarily affected the most marginalized and neglected people of the country's most vulnerable North-East Atlantic coastal region. This low-lying area is home to thousands of Miskito Indians, who depend on canoes to navigate shallow rivers and lakes to reach higher ground. It is the largest and poorest region of Nicaragua. The Miskito Indians are ethnically distinct from the rest of the population and enjoy a significant degree of political autonomy.

Furthermore, institutional decentralization often makes it unclear at what level responsibilities lie. For example, in the response to Hurricane Felix, the Governor of the North Atlantic Autonomous Region lacked the necessary support and capacity to manage the response. Consequently, even when the international community attempts to respect local capacity and promote locally owned responses, it is often difficult to know which level of authority should be supported, particularly when there is a high degree of autonomy and decentralization. It is therefore unclear what exactly "local" means.

A lack of means of transport and fuel often makes it difficult for implementing agencies to reach affected communities. In the response to Hurricane Felix, for example, logistics presented a real challenge and aid was concentrated in areas accessible by road, even though these areas were not the most affected by the storm.

### **CARE'S Approach to Local Capacity in Nicaragua**

CARE has officially been active in Nicaragua since 1966. In the late 1980s the NGO became an important actor in the country's response to disasters, providing humanitarian and rehabilitation assistance to affected populations. CARE, with its mostly national staff and an established track record, is often perceived as a national actor in Nicaragua despite being an NGO comprised of a global confederation of eleven member countries.<sup>7</sup>

CARE in Nicaragua states that its mission is to foster sustainable change by strengthening people's self-help capacity and providing assistance in emergencies. Building effective partnerships with local actors from the very beginning of operations is critical. An important precondition for the organization is to understand which local actors will help promote humanitarian and development objectives and how to bring them on board, since the implementation of emergency plans without significant involvement of local actors is also a lost opportunity for local empowerment. The advent of this rights-based approach to emergency assistance, focusing on empowerment in stead of humanitarian service delivery, represents a major paradigm shift in how aid is delivered. It has begun to permeate CARE and other aid agencies in recent years. Rights-based approaches tend to challenge authorities and traditional methods of implementing projects. This requires a delicate balancing act concerning the authorities' involve-

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.care.org.ni/quienessomos.php?care=careennicaragua> (last accessed 26/05/2009). The member countries of CARE are Australia, Austria, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, U.S., Norway, Japan and Brazil. In Nicaragua, while the population is accustomed to using words in English, all actors refer to CARE with the Spanish pronunciation "Kah- reh."

ment. Rather than focusing on need and beneficiaries, a rights-based approach focuses on people's ability to claim their rights and on the identification of duty-bearers, particularly the state, which has the duty to respect, protect and fulfill all the human rights to which they have committed for all citizens. These include social, economic, cultural, civic, and political rights.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, involving and empowering local actors proves a challenging task in areas of Nicaragua where CARE does not have a presence. Additionally, in Nicaragua a great degree of contextual knowledge and balancing is required in order to strengthen the most vulnerable and avoid clientelism.

Disaster preparedness efforts in Nicaragua attempt to establish community disaster response teams. There are also national disaster response teams which are meant to interact with the local level. In order to strengthen local capacities, one has thus to work at three levels—the community, the local authority, and the national/regional authority. However, CARE staff is confused about the meaning of the term “local,” since humanitarian actors use the term inconsistently. The organization observed that local can be defined in reference to the territorial level, the type of actors or the scope of activities. For example, the European Commission's Disaster Preparedness Program (DIPECHO) in Central America considers the local level to be the community and municipality. OFDA, in turn, used to fund local NGOs directly, but now operates in consultation with the government and acts accordingly.

## **U.S. and EU Programs in Relief and Disaster Preparedness: CARE's Experience in Nicaragua**

### *Hurricane Felix: The Role of Local Capacity*

As in other crises, the magnitude of the disaster caused by Hurricane Felix was determined not only by the storm's intensity, but by the vulnerability of the people living in the affected area. The effectiveness of the humanitarian response depended greatly on both the location and accessibility of communities, and the presence and capacity of local organizations and actors. The international response to Hurricane Felix was initially limited by the fact that many international organizations were either not on the ground or lacked sufficient capacity because the hurricane was expected to have the greatest impact on neighboring Honduras. As a result, many international emergency teams were not deployed in Nicaragua, but in Honduras, and villagers in the North Atlantic Autonomous Region received insufficient warning from officials. These failures were due not only to the shortcomings of the computer models used to predict the storm, but also to the fact that Felix “strengthened more rapidly than any other storm on record, anywhere in the world.”<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, although local authorities did warn the communities of the imminent storm, there was an institutional fear of “crying wolf,” stemming from their experience of the contrast between the alarm raised in the region in 2005 for Hurricane Beta and the limited damage which it actually caused.

<sup>8</sup> Buchanan-Smith and Fabbri, “Tsunami Evaluation Coalition Thematic Evaluation on Linking, Relief, Rehabilitation and Development—A Review Of The Debate,” November 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Willie Drye, “Hurricane Felix Forecasts Mostly Failed, Experts Say.” National Geographic News. 5 September 2007, <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2007/09/070905-felix-models.html>

Despite earlier disaster preparedness and prevention efforts in the North Atlantic Autonomous Region, local people were not sufficiently disaster aware. Sunshine and good weather led the population to believe that there was no imminent danger. The affected communities claimed that they first learned of the danger and believed the warnings when they saw the names of their towns and villages on television news. Locals claimed that, despite warnings, many emergency decisions were not taken, for example, to close schools.

In the context of Hurricane Felix, all actors involved in the response knew that the area's cultural and linguistic differences required locally owned interventions. Unfortunately, many existing national resources on disaster preparedness and response were not compatible with the specific cultural and geographic context and had to be translated or adapted. There were clear differences with respect to other areas of Nicaragua as even community leaders, while proficient in Spanish, had never heard of climate change or had never been affected by a disaster. Therefore, although national and regional protocols and means for intervention existed, the high level of autonomy, the remoteness of the region, and the lack of prior experience in disaster management affected the response.

Although Hurricane Felix was a relatively small-scale catastrophe in terms of the number of victims and destruction caused, it confirmed the vulnerability to recurring disasters. It is in such situations that the concept of donor engagement to prevent and prepare for disaster, as foreseen in the Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative, has special meaning.

### *The European Commission in Nicaragua: CARE's Experience*

#### *The Response to Hurricane Felix*

The European Commission, through ECHO, was a main donor in the emergency response to Hurricane Felix. While members of the international donor community have advocated for the need to "build back better," ECHO's mandate puts limits on the type of recovery assistance it can provide. For example, at times, the parameters of the primary emergency funding for the water and sanitation sector in the response to Felix did not allow for continuous monitoring and renewed needs assessment, which would have furthered a better understanding of the unfolding context and therefore increased aid appropriateness. Moreover, communication with beneficiary communities is essential if assistance is to be tailored to their changing needs and for the response strategies to be shaped by the priorities and concerns of the survivors. These concerns, and the shift from relief to recovery, should be captured in a follow-up needs assessment. In this sense, ECHO, in the key sector of basic water supply, was viewed as inflexible, because it did not allow agencies to improve pre-existing water supply systems. This decision was regarded as being out of touch with local realities, the cultural context, and the government's desire that the response to the disaster lead to real development.<sup>10</sup> For ECHO, given its mandate, primary emergency decisions are limited to its principal objective "to save and preserve lives in the aftermath of Hurricane Felix."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> HRI field interview.

<sup>11</sup> Commission decision on the financing of primary emergency humanitarian operations from the general budget of the European Communities in Nicaragua.

### *DIPECHO*

ECHO's disaster preparedness program, DIPECHO, aims to improve the capacities of communities at risk to better prepare and protect themselves from natural disasters.<sup>12</sup> The program recognizes that technical knowledge and indigenous knowledge must be merged in a socio-culturally appropriate manner, to establish an effective system that capitalizes on existing knowledge and capacities and maximizes ownership and sustainability. DIPECHO's strengths lie in its focus on the local community. It empowers needy communities, providing them with additional capacities in the form of equipment, local brigades, scientific and technical systems, early warning systems, documentation and risk maps. On the other hand, for CARE, the "Achilles' tendon" of the DIPECHO program is its sustainability. Implementation timeframes are considered limited for the number of activities and numerous objectives foreseen. However, ECHO's mandate does not allow for implementation periods to exceed 15 months. At a different level, DG ECHO does not engage in dialogue with national authorities and hence, exerts less influence at the country level.

### *CARE's Experience in Working with ECHO*

CARE in Nicaragua has been funded by the DIPECHO program for almost ten years and recognizes that many lessons have been acquired throughout that period. With almost every project CARE has implemented, additional lessons have been learned, which are shared among the agencies working under the DIPECHO program. These agencies regularly consult each other and contribute to the design and implementation of the Commission's disaster preparedness programs.

Based on past program experience, the Nicaragua National Consultative Meeting Process, organized by DIPECHO, made the following recommendations regarding local capacity:

- Encourage local participation in the construction of mitigation and evacuation infrastructure in order to ensure efficiency, empowerment and sustainability.
- NGOs are encouraged to design a common advocacy strategy at different levels (local, national) in order to ensure impact.
- Local participation must be encouraged in order to achieve replicability of good practices.
- Risk maps are to be elaborated according to national standards, using conventional symbols, and at a relevant scale for contingency and territorial planning at the local level.
- The Ministry of Education's guidelines and educative materials should be promoted.
- Coordination among the local, sub-national and national levels is strongly recommended in order to foster sustainable and replicable processes.
- Community Early Warning Systems must be connected to the national network.

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<sup>12</sup> Article 2(f) of Humanitarian Aid Regulation (EC) of 20 June 1996, DG ECHO's activities in the field of Disaster Preparedness are "to ensure preparedness for risks of natural disasters or comparable circumstances and use a suitable rapid early-warning and intervention system."

- Strengthen the sub-national level in order (i) to facilitate information exchange between the local and national levels and (ii) to offer technical support that is more appropriate to local needs.
- Activities for strengthening institutions must respect the existing legal framework and municipal planning. Partners should advocate for the inclusion of disaster preparedness activities in municipal plans.
- Promote a participatory approach among government staff in order to reinforce the links between communities and public institutions.

For many donors, when disaster strikes, there is pressure to disburse funds immediately. This was also the case with the European Commission, which had initially earmarked €1 million for the primary emergency response to Hurricane Felix. The limited number of partners with the capacity to respond in the region and eligible to receive funding from ECHO, made CARE Nicaragua, through CARE France, a natural ally for the Commission. Given its emergency mandate, CARE felt compelled to apply for primary emergency grants. It received €560,000 from ECHO. CARE was “on alert,” but, much like other actors, it was less prepared to intervene in the Atlantic. Nonetheless, CARE’s emergency response personnel was dispatched from Managua and participated in response activities in the immediate aftermath of the storm. As a result, the organization needed to be simultaneously involved in response, assessment, and proposal drafting for ECHO funding, which proved to be challenging. This was particularly the case because for CARE there is a trade-off between responding rapidly to a disaster and carrying out an in-depth assessment. As such, CARE felt in hindsight that they were too specific when drafting the primary emergency proposal. When needs assessments came back, CARE quickly realized that adjustments needed to be made. The organization especially disagreed with ECHO’s policy that humanitarian response should be limited to restoring pre-existing conditions, without further improvements. Given that the social and economic conditions in the North Atlantic Autonomous Region are far worse than in the rest of the country, the hurricane, with all its negative consequences, could have been an opportunity to improve pre-existing living conditions. Yet, the detailed proposal left CARE little room for maneuver in terms of adapting the response to the actual context and to link relief with development in order to build back better.

The organization’s failure to link relief with development activities created significant tension within CARE teams. While some staff argued that poor access to safe water and basic sanitation can affect a community’s ability to prevent epidemics and cope with disaster, others questioned the method of “building back better” arguing that—under the condition of finite resources—the targeted communities should not receive aid that could be provided by other actors, since such an intervention would mean that fewer people could be reached with aid.

The area of developmental relief is off limits under primary emergency funding of ECHO.<sup>13</sup> However, a more limited response may impede the targeted communities’ capacity to fully

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<sup>13</sup> For more information about financing decisions see Chapter 3. For more information about developmental relief see Chapter 8.



rebuild. Additionally, the time period for the intervention was too limited, and created logistical challenges.

CARE believes that standard responses are not suitable for humanitarian activities in the North Atlantic Autonomous Region. Indeed, beneficiary selection and intervention criteria interfered with local social community concepts. Communities had great difficulty understanding donor rationale which led to significant problems and proved disempowering for affected communities. Given the European Commission's existing guidelines for primary emergency response, CARE was not able to obtain the level of flexibility from the Commission it felt to be necessary. According to CARE, the cultural norm in the region is that extreme poverty must be dealt with at large. It is difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish within a community between the chronically poor who never had access to basic utilities and those affected by disaster. Given existing living conditions, the process of defining entitlement to assistance according to the donors' criteria became arbitrary and led to considerable problems for the implementing partners. NGOs were threatened and local demonstrations were staged. Due to this lack of flexibility, prospects for turning disaster into opportunity were lost.

### *The United States in Nicaragua: CARE's Experience*

#### *The Response to Hurricane Felix*

In the context of Hurricane Felix, the U.S. mainly provided emergency relief supplies and air support. The U.S. military airlifted aid out of Puerto Cabezas to hard hit areas as part of its humanitarian assistance program, which works with countries in the region to improve disaster relief. Approximately \$1.5 million was spent on airlifts, while OFDA provided small grants to local NGOs.

#### *Central America Mitigation Initiative (CAMI)*

In February 2000, as part of the \$630 million U.S. Government response, OFDA announced a three-year, \$11 million Central America Mitigation Initiative (CAMI) for the region, with preference given to the most severely affected countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. CAMI's goal was to reduce the impact of natural disasters in Central America by financing activities that increased the capacity of regional, national, and community authorities and organizations to forecast, respond to, and prevent disasters.

The presidential initiative aimed to improve risk management (preparedness, readiness, and response capabilities) by training emergency personnel and countering the over-centralization of disaster services at the capital level. Furthermore, the program sought to upgrade community knowledge of how to prepare for and respond to disasters, as well as oppose cultural beliefs in myths on the causes of disasters that may have prevented communities from taking action. CAMI focused on training and the provision of the necessary equipment to respond to an emergency. It also implemented several small structural mitigation projects.

After the end of CAMI, U.S. involvement in the region has been more modest. For example, U.S. assistance in response to Hurricane Felix was initially not as significant as that of other donors and much of its relief efforts were channeled through the U.S. Southern Command.<sup>14</sup> The Southern Command played a key role in facilitating the provision of supplies to areas difficult to access. Observers in the region, including the Coordination Centre for Natural Disaster Prevention in Central America claim that the U.S. is now largely absent. OFDA was an important reference in the past, however, and current damage assessment methods are still based on the methodology it developed more than ten years ago.

### *CARE's Experience in Working with OFDA*

The Central American Mitigation Initiative became a flagship program for CARE in the region. It served to radically transform existing approaches to community participation and local capacities, as well as to establish and enhance appropriate methodological approaches and interventions in disaster preparedness and prevention. A key example is the capacity and vulnerability assessment that was developed as a framework for assessment at the community level. CAMI developed a philosophically different approach to community participation. For CARE, CAMI was a stepping stone in the region giving special weight to NGOs, as well as community involvement and capacities. CAMI also helped to map actors' roles, which served to define relationships and guide the actions of a broad array of actors, ranging from communities to municipal authorities to national institutions. The process served to establish working methods and to plan an integration process that would make interventions coordinated and complementary. OFDA believes that its cooperation with several local NGO is a result of CAMI, but views Nicaragua as one of the weakest countries in CAMI.

Yet, for response activities in the aftermath of Hurricane Felix, CARE received minimal funding from OFDA. The Office has designated other partners through which it channels its funding in the area.

## **Enabling Factors and Stumbling Blocks for the Implementation of Lessons Regarding Local Capacity in Nicaragua**

Enablers and impediments to implementing lessons learned on valuing and strengthening local capacities can be categorized under the following four themes: timeliness and time frames; rights and responsibilities; information and communication; local partnerships.

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<sup>14</sup>The United States Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), located in Miami, Florida, is one of ten unified Combatant Commands (COCOMs) in the Department of Defense. It is responsible for providing contingency planning, operations, and security cooperation for Central and South America, the Caribbean, Cuba and the Bahamas, and their territorial waters; as well as for the force protection of U.S. military resources at these locations. Helping partners in the region prepare for, and respond to, natural and man-made disasters is a key part of SOUTHCOM's humanitarian assistance efforts. The Command remains poised to direct U.S. military forces to help a nation in the aftermath of a disaster if that nation requests help through the U.S. Government. Any such missions are in support of USAID's OFDA. SOUTHCOM directed forces in response to a Sept. 4 request for international assistance from the government of Nicaragua. The deployments were carried out in close coordination with the U.S. Department of State and USAID. Forces airlifted aid out of a Puerto Cabezas airfield to hard hit areas on Nicaragua's northeast coast. Overall, U.S. aircraft flew 173 sorties, airlifting more than 490,000 pounds of aid. <http://www.southcom.mil/AppsSC/factFiles.php?id=27>

### *Timeliness and Timeframes*

Pressure to act quickly in the relief phase often undermines inclusive approaches to humanitarian assistance. While actors have recognized the importance of including local actors, moreover, their short time horizon prevents them from implementing these lessons. For both ECHO and OFDA, it is the absence of a long-term view that often cripples the ability to engage in proper disaster risk reduction, since capacity is best built before disaster strikes. Humanitarian donors, however, feel pressured to provide the bulk of their response in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. Visibility considerations and domestic pressure focus a response on relief and rehabilitation, rather than preparedness and prevention. Examples of donor funding outside emergency scenarios (DIPECHO and CAMI) show that these initiatives often help to focus on and strengthen local capacity.

### *Rights and Responsibilities*

A key lesson emerging from advocacy research<sup>15</sup> is that strengthening local capacities involves empowering citizens to challenge their own government to fulfill their rights and take decisive action to reduce disaster vulnerability. Emphasis on local capacity goes hand in hand with adopting participatory approaches. The many reasons for valuing and building the capacity of local organizations and local people have to do with efficiency; local knowledge; ensuring that mitigation and preparedness measures are locally embedded; and laying the foundations for sustainable development after the crisis has passed. Working with, and strengthening local organizations is central to a rights-based approach to humanitarian action.

The challenge for aid agencies when considering a rights-based approach is how to apply it in practice. It becomes a difficult balancing act to reduce vulnerability in a more sustainable manner in the long-term, address violations of rights, and simultaneously develop collaborative relationships with authorities in disaster preparedness programs. In the context of CARE in Nicaragua, its efforts in disaster preparedness are entrenched in a positive longstanding relationship with local authorities.

An important issue is knowing where to establish boundaries in terms of promoting good governance in disaster risk reduction. As donors' humanitarian aid departments are not usually involved in poverty reduction strategies and country plans, it becomes an even greater challenge to push for disaster risk reduction at the national level. For policies to change and for local actors to become genuinely responsible, rights and responsibilities must be established and advocated for. On the positive side, humanitarian engagement in disaster risk reduction promotes a focus on the community level and an attempt towards prioritizing the most vulnerable areas. It is unlikely that governments at a national level, and all the more in the case of Nicaragua that receives budget support, prioritize local capacities in disaster risk reduction.

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<sup>15</sup> Tearfund Disaster Risk Reduction Advocacy Guide.

### *Information and Communication*

OFDA considers the lack of institutional memory and institutional change as the main impediments to applying lessons learned and good practice. For example, members of armed forces that participated in providing response to a given disaster are not the same in a similar disaster some time later. A similar situation occurs with staff on the receiving side. For OFDA “too many new actors need to learn, and once they have learned, they move to another position, many times to a completely different area.”

Understanding how humanitarian emergencies relate to underdevelopment and underutilized local capacities, which can be strengthened, is central to mainstreaming local capacities in global aid efforts and country policies. Local capacities associated with the provision of relief and disaster preparedness often fall into a no man’s land. It is perhaps humanitarian efforts that have the most to gain from local capacities in terms of preparedness, as local actors are first responders in times of emergency. Preparedness and prevention go hand in hand and should be mainstreamed into development strategies, which embark on state efforts and capacity building and have the necessary budgets available to address the issue. Humanitarian aid projects are more piecemeal as humanitarians, by mandate, prioritize life saving activities and the provision of relief in disaster response. It follows, therefore, that at the donor headquarter level, only limited humanitarian funding is allocated to disaster preparedness.

From a regional perspective, observers consider that coordination and information sharing have been limited across European Commission programs. New or ongoing Commission programs seem to lack both the means and flexibility to create synergies with the DIPECHO program. Moreover, these programs in their design did not consider the wealth of experience and information the DIPECHO program offers. A clear example of this lack of linking across services is the under-utilization of the DIPECHO Central America participatory country strategy documents. New Commission programs lack the necessary consideration of priorities and criteria to guide their activity in disaster risk reduction.

According to both OFDA and ECHO, communication between the EU and U.S. is very strong in the Caribbean and is improving in Central America. The tide of collaboration and information sharing is on the rise.

### *Local Partnerships*

The DIPECHO program is based on the concept of valuing and strengthening local capacities, yet it is unable to directly fund national organizations. Under existing regulations, CARE in Nicaragua can only be funded via CARE France. At the national consultative meetings, where CARE and other national actors such as Civil Defense participate, Nicaraguan NGOs are invited, but choose not to attend as they feel that they are not on equal footing with their foreign counterparts. OFDA by contrast focuses to a greater extent on motivating local NGO participation and awards them small grants.

### *Effective Tools and Methods*

Actors in the region have identified a number of other effective tools and methods for strengthening local capacity, such as:

- Conducting humanitarian response needs assessments side by side with local capacities assessments.
- Mapping local capacities at all levels. Local capacities must be mapped at the national, regional and local levels. CARE in Nicaragua has been effectively engaged in the process of mapping capacities at all levels but learned that it had fewer partners and capacities identified on the Atlantic side and that this affected the quality of its response and put further strain on CARE's personnel to ensure the operation's efficiency and effectiveness.
- Providing a seamless transition from the preparedness and relief phase to the recovery and development stages.
- Providing increased assistance in terms of coordination to give unity to NGO work in the sector.
- Participatory consultation processes identifying the priorities for preparedness and response in the region.
- Publishing lessons learned documents, new appropriate technologies and successful disaster relief and preparedness projects experiences for dissemination among stakeholders.
- Having a contractor selected before the response, in order to move financial resources faster (in the case of OFDA).
- Having grant guidelines for NGOs and other actors. Holding a briefing session for such actors so that the guidelines and procedures which are necessary to access funding are well understood.
- Holding donor meetings before the hurricane season in order to prepare for the response. In the Caribbean, OFDA meets with Canada, DFID and the EU, usually in April, to prepare for upcoming hurricane season.
- Preparing distribution plans for different countries and areas within countries with the governments of the region and NGOs.

### **Conclusions**

The critical periods for working with and strengthening local organizations are before the disaster to build preparedness, and throughout the recovery phase to build ownership and sustainable structures. However, disaster response still prevails. In Central America, 90 percent of the mobilization of resources occurs after the disaster hits. If donor involvement is mainly forthcoming in the wake of a disaster, capacities have usually not been sufficiently built or

identified. In the aftermath of an emergency, implementation periods are short and recovery processes focus on improving existing conditions and engaging in rehabilitation efforts. Multiple tasks, the complexity of recovery efforts, and limited timeframes often eclipse efforts to strengthen local capacity.

Boundaries need to be redrawn to integrate short-term perspectives focusing on immediate needs, with longer-term perspectives in support of development processes. In his essay on “Humanitarian Futures,” Randolph Kent concludes that “in the future, we will need a humanitarian paradigm shift that understands disasters and emergencies not as unfortunate occurrences that take place at the margins of human existence, but as reflections of the ways that human beings live their ‘normal lives’, and hence the ways that they structure their societies and allocate their resources.”<sup>16</sup>

While it is recognized throughout the humanitarian community that there is a need to respect and promote local capacity, international actors all too often equate the term local with the national level. Hurricane Felix illustrates the importance of distinguishing and prioritizing needs and capacity building at a more local level, especially in contexts such as the North Atlantic Autonomous Region, where decentralization is, and must be, a reality, and where communities are isolated. International aid should aim to recognize, identify, use, and strengthen local capacity. It is important for agencies to seek to build and capitalize on existing local networks, and to strengthen existing coping strategies and support systems. CARE Nicaragua has emphasized its awareness of this lesson after its response to Hurricane Felix.<sup>17</sup> With little surge capacity in the affected area, the ability of the humanitarian community to respond to needs depended on the quality of truly local staff and organizations.

Local capacities must be built, strengthened, and recognized prior to disasters so that they can effectively be used in disaster response. This is true in the case of Nicaragua as well as in other contexts. Yet, local capacity efforts linked to disaster risk reduction tend to fall into a no man’s land, with neither development nor humanitarian agencies feeling responsible to address the issue properly. Additionally, the topic is still misunderstood both at the country and the donor level.

Specific to the Nicaraguan context is the European Commission’s presence with a regional delegation in Managua and relatively significant funding. In contrast, the U.S. has limited activity in the country. In the Nicaraguan context, the DIPECHO program has become well known and has developed strong relationships with partners such as Civil Defense, a key actor in disaster response and preparedness. The importance of Civil Defense within the system and the tradition of local organization and participation in Nicaragua favor effective disaster preparedness.

What is common to other contexts is the need for flexibility to tailor response to local communities and their specificities. While protocols and guidelines for selecting projects need to be clear, once the community has been identified and selected, processes and activities should be designed in accordance with the overarching goal of valuing and strengthening local capac-

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<sup>16</sup> Randolph Kent, “Humanitarian Futures. Practical policy perspectives,” HPN Network Paper No. 46 (London: ODI, April 2004), [www.odihpn.org/documents/networkpaper046.pdf](http://www.odihpn.org/documents/networkpaper046.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Humanitarian Response Index field interview.

ity. Depending on the context, hazard and the type of population residing in the community, their specific vulnerabilities and capacities, choice of activities and plans should be adapted.

Furthermore, strategies that are flexible enough to adapt to different phases and interventions are the most effective way to reach vulnerable people with the right aid. Humanitarian action and development aid are separate types of assistance, for many well justified reasons. The timely rehabilitation of communities suffering from sudden-onset disasters requires flexibility and speed. Experience, however, shows that recovery is essentially a development issue. In the delicate transition from relief to recovery, repeated needs assessments should be carried out to prioritize communities' needs, adapt the response to an evolving context, and move towards long-term livelihood strategies. In a disaster-prone area like the North Atlantic Autonomous Region, responses must mainstream disaster risk reduction, giving full consideration to social and cultural realities.

