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SUPPORTING RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE IN ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES

Addressing compound hazards through strengthened resilient recovery and emergency preparedness and response activities

AT A GLANCE

Country: St. Vincent and the Grenadines
Risks: Volcanic eruption, multi-hazard
GFDRR Areas of Engagement: Enabling resilient recovery

Abstract

Investments in disaster preparedness and response are guiding St. Vincent and the Grenadines to a resilient recovery from the eruption of La Soufrière volcano.

Context/Introduction

In April 2021, St. Vincent and the Grenadines experienced a significant volcanic event when La Soufrière—an active volcano that dominates the island of St. Vincent—erupted. A series of eruptions ejected dense hot ash, lava fragments, and toxic gases from the volcano, displacing over 23,000 people and causing damage to housing, public infrastructure, and agriculture worth up to $154 million, or 18 percent of the national GDP for 2020.

The eruption also had a disruptive impact on public health, as evacuations were made complicated by the COVID-19 crisis. This required extra precautions to avoid outbreaks in shelters and in neighboring countries that agreed to take in evacuees, and by affected communities' prolonged exposure to volcanic gases. The eruption occurred just two months before the official start of the 2021 hurricane season, presenting a series of compounding challenges for the government to contend with.

In anticipation of the steep costs associated with rapid response, the government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines (GoSVG) took swift measures to comprehensively assess and strengthen their infrastructural capacities for disaster response and recovery. The GoSVG undertook these measures in coordination with two programs managed by the Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery (GFDRR): the European Union (EU)-funded Caribbean Regional Resilience Building Facility (CRRBF) and the Canada-Caribbean Resilience Facility (CRF), funded with support from the government of Canada. These programs, which complement each other, both aim to enhance long-term disaster resilience and adaptation capacity for the most vulnerable countries in the Caribbean.

Ash cloud from the La Soufrière volcano. Photo: CDEMA.

Approach

The first step on the road to resilient recovery is to address the immediate needs of the most vulnerable communities. In this regard, the work carried under the EU CRRBF and the Canada CRF has been instrumental in restoring critical services and communicating essential information to populations impacted by the eruption. For example, in the first days following the initial eruption, a concerted effort was made to warn communities of the potential harmful impacts of volcanic ash. A series of public service announcement videos and radio broadcasts, expert interviews on local media, and safety tips and guidelines broadcast via social media were rapidly produced in coordination with the National Emergency Management Organization (NEMO) to provide useful information on ways to safely interact with ash and protect family members, homes, and vehicles.

The eruption of La Soufrière also catalyzed the GoSVG to critically examine its capacities for emergency preparedness and response based on its experience in responding to the eruption. With the help of its international partners, the GoSVG, and in particular NEMO, has undertaken a thorough diagnostic process to determine the adequacy of current legal and institutional frameworks, human resources, operational facilities and equipment, and information management systems. As part of the effort to address some of the gaps

CRF Canada Caribbean Resilience Facility

In partnership with Canada

CARIBBEAN REGIONAL RESILIENCE BUILDING FACILITY

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RESULTS IN RESILIENCE SERIES

identified, NEMO is receiving support in developing a new Emergency Shelter Management policy, which includes advice on COVID-19 protocols as well as a training program and manual for shelters—the National Emergency and Shelter Management Plan training program and the Assistance Guidelines manual—which are both still in development.

Resilient recovery also depends on the protection of key infrastructure assets and the rapid restoration of critical services such as water, energy, and transportation after a disaster. The GoSVG has recognized the resilience of key infrastructure as a high priority in its disaster risk management policy and is directly implementing a project that supports investments in the rapid restoration and resilient reconstruction of priority infrastructure. In this regard, the EU-funded CRRBF is co-financing the $40 million World Bank Volcanic Eruption Emergency Project (VEEP) with a $2 million grant that focuses on improving the capacities of the government to systematically prepare for and respond to compound emergencies following an eruption. To complement this effort, the CRF is providing GoSVG with technical experts to aid support the implementation of VEEP.

Highlighted Results

- **An effective emergency communications campaign:** Immediately after the eruption of La Soufrière, NEMO was able to publish a series of videos to build awareness about the harmful effects of volcanic ash. These videos (Breathing Ash, Protect Home, and Local Calypsonian) were then disseminated via local media and social media channels. Additional information on CRF activities highlights that support to the government in the post-disaster recovery is aimed at handling future crises.

- **Institutional strengthening for improved recovery:** Institutional support provided to the GoSVG has been instrumental in guiding recovery efforts—for instance, through developing and validating a new Emergency Shelter Management policy. Through the CRF, GFDRR has provided essential support to the government to strengthen effective institutional systems and public financial management for preparation and response to disasters.

- **Investment opportunities for resilient reconstruction and emergency preparedness and response capacity:** The $40 million World Bank Volcanic Eruption Emergency Project (VEEP), which was co-financed with $2 million from the EU-funded CRRBF is a major milestone and support provided with core technical experts from the CRF is a testament to the GFDRR's ability to leverage additional capacities and support its partners.

Volcanic ash on a village in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Photo: Kirk Morris.

LESSONS LEARNED

The post-eruption analytical work on emergency preparedness and response capacities can be further leveraged to inform the country's efforts to build a multi-hazard resilience strategy to prepare for compound emergencies, such as hurricanes, flooding, and the continuing impacts of COVID-19.

While different programs that share the goal of responding to the eruption can create the risk of redundant work, the coordination displayed by the different GFDRR-funded activities in St. Vincent and the Grenadines has led to the projects complementing each other, each focusing on different aspects of the post-eruption recovery.

"We are very grateful to the Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery, the EU and Canada for their support on these different components which has allowed us to build our capacity, focus on meeting our goals under the Sendai Framework, and also on our national Programs aiming to increase the resilience of St. Vincent and the Grenadines."

—Michelle Forbes, Director of the National Emergency Management Organisation (NEMO), St. Vincent and the Grenadines