COVID-19

POLICY NOTE

The impact of flooding and health complications will probably increase during the rainy season because of the Covid-19 Pandemic
Executive Statement

In the midst of a reinforced integration process, the member countries of the Central American Integration System [Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana] responded effectively and in a timely manner to curb the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to national actions, SICA developed a Contingency Plan that includes a forward-looking vision which, based on the competences and capacities of our regional institutions, analyzes the risks and opportunities in a complex manner. Now, with the approach of the rainy season and the next hurricane season, SICA is coordinating its technical capacities in order to support member countries in their preparation and recovery processes.

Vinicio Cerezo. Secretary General of SICA.

The communities in Central America and the Dominican Republic that are more exposed to flooding and more vulnerable because of the confinement and other social, economic, and health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, will have greater challenges to their resilience during this rainy season and hurricane season. This multihazard scenario is made even more complex with the increase in seasonal respiratory illnesses, which could affect the risk conditions of the population in light of the pandemic.

Claudia Herrera, Executive Secretary of the Coordination Center for the Prevention of Disasters in Central America (CEPREDENAC)
1. General Situation with COVID-19 in the Central American region

According to the situation report of 27 May at 09:40 am, the Central American region has a total of 39,367 confirmed cases and 1,124 deaths, with 17,844 recovered. The member countries of SICA have continued applying prevention and containment measures for COVID-19, which include self-isolation and the closure of borders, among others.

Note: All “Central America united against the coronavirus” reports [Centroamérica unida contra el coronavirus] can be downloaded from the specialized section on the SICA website.
2. Situation with the rainy season

The Regional Climate Outlook for the months of May, June, and July 2020 allows for the generation of a warning about areas for potential flooding that would have an over 40% chance of experiencing above normal rainfall. Between 15 and 17 April, the Central American Climate Forum [Foro Centroamericano del Clima] reviewed and analyzed the most recent oceanic and atmospheric conditions; historical rainfall records, global model forecasts, and their possible implications for rainfall patterns in the region, as well as historical records and statistical analyses provided by each of the meteorological services in the region. With these inputs, a consensus was reached in the “LXI Regional Climate Outlook [Perspectiva Regional del Clima]” for Central America, including the South of Mexico and the Dominican Republic.

Apart from the outlook for each of the countries, the Forum indicates that the tropical hurricane season in the North Atlantic Ocean Basin will be more intense than normal because of the favorable Atlantic Multidecadal Oscillation/Tropical Northern Atlantic [AMO/TNA] conditions. It is forecast that 14 to 18 tropical storms will form: between 7 and 9 could become hurricanes, and between 3 and 4 could reach above category 3 on the Saffir Simpson scale (destructive hurricanes). The analysis of similar years indicates a high probability of the development of at least one tropical cyclone between June and July in the Caribbean Sea near the Central American coast. See Regional Committee for Hydraulic Resources [Comité Regional de Recursos Hidráulicos].

When the rainy season starts, the Central American region will find itself with active and different confinement measures in most countries, which are necessary for the containment of the pandemic, but with possible negative impacts on community resilience to disasters. In general, the regional situation with the pandemic as at 30 April is that the number of cases continues to rise, while the risk of flooding and other
socio-natural threats is imminent. It is expected that there will be an increase in vulnerability, in light of the social and economic fragility that would be exacerbated in countries that still have active measures.

There is a high probability of facing a complex emergency scenario because of:

- The convergence of the rainy season in areas of high exposure and vulnerability;
- The confinement of persons as a result of COVID-19 in zones exposed to flooding, especially urban flooding; and
- The possible increase in respiratory illnesses, a common trend during the rainy season, which would increase the risk of co-infection and the vulnerability of the population in the wake of COVID-19.

### 3. Hurricane Season 2020: It will be more active than normal

It is forecast that this year (2020), the hurricane season will be more active than normal, according to institutions that specialize in weather forecasts, like the University of Colorado and The Weather Company.
The hurricane season in the Atlantic begins on 1st June, coinciding with the social reopening of some countries in the Central American region. The COVID19 crisis has absorbed significant resources, which may limit availability for hurricane preparedness, especially for communities that will face complex risk scenarios. Without strong and focused leadership at all levels of government, the Central American region could face a tough and deadly season.

Plans need to be developed to support safe social distancing from the virus for hurricane evacuees. In addition, it is necessary to prepare the shelter infrastructure, hotels and basic services to receive coastal refugees fleeing from strong hurricanes. Planning for shelters and houses of last resort must take into account preventive social distancing.

Long-term recovery is another potential challenge as already crowded supply chains will have obvious difficulties managing potential port disruptions, along with a localized surge in demand for staple products and construction materials.

On June 1, Central American countries must verify if there is enough transportation, hotels and temporary shelters free of COVID19. Safe accommodation options should be available when refugees from the coastal zone head inland.

Universal post-exposure detection and identification mechanisms for infected individuals should be prioritized for communities threatened by hurricanes. Countries should do their utmost to ensure that disaster management agencies and governments can identify infections, this is the only way that authorities can guide those who are still vulnerable to infection to “safe from virus” shelters, if such shelters can be established.

Rapid deployment forms of medical surveillance need to be identified. Likewise, it is necessary to define policies to control the movement of people related to COVID19 that do not obstruct the agile evacuation of people due to the imminent impact of a Cyclone.

Response teams will also face complex scenarios and need to redesign protocols that have already become obsolete as they may be subject to further wear and tear from the likely contagion of personnel. A larger number of available units may be required as infected personnel will need to be quarantined.
4. **Main implications of the combination of the COVID-19 epidemic and the rainy season May-July 2020,**

| a. A possible impact at the start of the rainy season in areas that experience normal or above normal precipitation would be the effect on communities that are more exposed, as well as the effect on zones or infrastructures identified as shelters, or on those that are somewhat overpopulated or congested, as well as migrant transit areas, prisons or others. In these spaces, the transmission of the virus could intensify under the current conditions if COVID-19 prevention and protection plans are not implemented, as well as sanitation and hygiene protocols for waste management. It is important to have knowledge and early detection of hazards that can create complex scenarios, especially in zones with infrastructure dedicated to COVID-19. |
| b. A possible increase in the vulnerability of urban communities, with a greater demand for emergency operations and humanitarian assistance. As indicated by La Red in its article “The social construction of the COVID-19 pandemic: disaster, risk accumulation, and public policies” [La construcción social de la pandemia COVID-19: desastre, acumulación de riesgos y políticas públicas] “… it is also possible that public policies for the confinement of low-income populations, from a strictly epidemiological perspective, can increase the daily risks faced by this population [es también posible que las políticas públicas para confinar poblaciones de bajos recursos, desde una perspectiva exclusivamente epidemiológica, puedan aumentar los riesgos cotidianos enfrentados por esta población].” This situation could mean an increase in the vulnerability of urban communities in fragile socioeconomic conditions, which could result in an increased demand for first response, humanitarian assistance, and post-impact recovery services. |
| c. Several factors could create even more complex scenarios: |
| i. The difficulties presented by the pandemic for local and national governments to carry out preventive maintenance on rainwater systems; |
| ii. The existing unsafe conditions in various urban centers in the region, which already pose challenges for preparedness and response in some cities; |
| iii. The physical, psychosocial, and material toll on national emergency and civil protection systems, including local and national health services; and |
| iv. The need to conduct capacity analyses and to respond to seasonal threats. |
d. **Possible increase in cases of respiratory illness and increase in risk levels in the wake of COVID-19.** The rainy season will bring an increase in respiratory illnesses, which are typical for the season. There is an increase in colds, the seasonal flu, allergies, asthma, and others. In light of this scenario, there will probably be respiratory co-infections among the seasonal flu viruses and the virus that causes COVID-19, including in places of shelter or refuge, which could create additional complications and confusion in the health systems. Intense monitoring will have to be done to compare the statistics for past periods with the behavior of these illnesses during the current rainy season.

e. **At the start of the rainy season most countries will find themselves without their financial protection instruments for disasters, especially those for risk retention.** The intense fiscal and budgetary pressure that countries have faced during this crisis has generated the use of risk retention financial instruments like contingent lines of credit and emergency funds. Given the serious limitations for immediate liquidity and the actual depletion of emergency funds, it is important to bear in mind that there are also risk transfer mechanisms available for SICA member countries, like the regional risk pool of the Caribbean Catastrophe Risk Insurance Facility Segregated Portfolio Company (CCRIF SPC), which provides coverage against events related to excess rainfall and hurricanes, among others. However, in the midst of this COVID-19 crisis, countries will be forced to negotiate the contracting of these parametric insurance coverage products in a context of more limited budget resources.
5. General recommendations for national authorities

1. Update shelter management protocols, taking into account distancing criteria, hygiene and sanitation measures, as well as COVID-19 prevention and protection plans, including the identification of the high-risk population, as well as vulnerable persons and groups, based on gender, age, health, and disabilities. This includes securing the necessary material and inputs for the personal protection of sheltered persons, as well as support personnel in these shelters, including the use of waste management protocols (masks, etc.).

2. Update geo-referenced information on “hot spots” for recurrent urban flooding. Update contingency or emergency plans for the rainy season and establish contingent and redundancy measures (alternative shelters) in areas with a high recurrence of flooding.

3. Update the calculation of technical requirements, first response materials, and humanitarian assistance materials based on updated contingency plans, including the mapping of available humanitarian personnel and the identification of high-risk groups within this grouping (persons over 55 years of age), as well as the calculation of COVID-19 personal protective equipment.

4. Update existing recovery plans or strategies, including projections for the population’s needs for the recovery of livelihoods, bearing in mind that they are impaired because of the measures taken to tackle the pandemic.

5. Prevent and coordinate with the regional private sector, on all scales, to promote the adoption or updating of business continuity and resilience plans.

6. Strengthen coordination mechanisms between health systems, COE, EMT and URH, for the epidemiological surveillance of COVID-19 in shelters and emergency response interventions for the monitoring, detection, and treatment of positive cases.

7. Evaluate the financial management strategies for disaster risk to optimize available tools and thus have liquidity to cope with any complex emergencies that appear in the short term.
### 6. Additional support from the Regional Contingency Plan

As indicated in the Central American Contingency Plan [Plan de Contingencia Centroamericano], CEPREDENAC will continue to support countries in the region, based on needs and requests presented, in the following aspects:

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<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>CEPREDENAC Action</th>
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<tr>
<td>Measure 1.5.1. Activate the Regional Mechanism for Humanitarian Assistance in the event of Disasters in the Central American Integration System [Mecanismo Regional de Asistencia Humanitaria ante Desastres del Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana MECREG – SICA]</td>
<td>Update MECREG and protocols to include considerations about measures to tackle COVID, such as isolation, reduced mobility, and the closure of borders, as well as protection and hygiene for teams in the assisted and assisting countries.</td>
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<td>Measure 1.5.7 CEPREDENAC will continue to support the consolidation of regional information through the information and coordination platform in a complementary way for emergency management.</td>
<td>RCompile regional information from official sources and National Emergency Operations Centers. Consolidate information through the information and coordination platform as a mechanism for the conducting of analyses of complex scenarios.</td>
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<td>Measure 1.5.10. Prevention and preparation in the face of multiple-threat complex situations and increasing of the resilience to the potential impact on livelihoods, mental health, the resilience of families, communities, private companies, among others, which could result in significant increases in vulnerability to recurring and seasonal threats.</td>
<td>Activate a multiple-hazard analysis team using personnel from regional entities and national institutions specializing in information on hazard and vulnerability. Issue analysis reports on the evolution of multi-hazard impact scenarios, in the context of COVID-19. Support governing bodies in the development of prevention and preparation measures for the management of and response to emergencies generated by other hazards. Mobilize technical assistance so that governing bodies can develop or update specific plans and protocols for complex scenarios.</td>
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