

# Central America allied against the Coronavirus COVID-19



**The COVID-19 crisis** has demonstrated the importance of preparedness and the coordination capacities of national and regional disaster risk management agencies. The notes below includes good practices and lessons learned from Central America and the Dominican Republic.

The promotion of regional and cross-border cooperation mechanisms is essential for effective, multisectoral and coordinated management of the pandemic from a disaster risk reduction approach.



# Background

Following the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) at a global level, the pro tempore presidency of Honduras and the general secretariat of the Central American Integration System (SICA) convened an emergency virtual meeting on 12 March, 2020. Its aim was to identify and coordinate measures among the SICA member states. Meeting participants included heads of state from Honduras, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Panama and the Dominican Republic, alongside the deputy prime minister of Belize. The meeting concluded with the adoption of the “Central America allied against the coronavirus” declaration which recommended the development of a Regional Contingency Plan to deal with the pandemic.

In response to this recommendation, the Coordination Centre for Disaster Prevention in Central America and the Dominican Republic (CEPREDENAC) has developed a prevention, containment, treatment and recovery strategy for COVID-19. It has also defined actions and protocols for information management with a multi-hazard approach, as stipulated by the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030.

CEPREDENAC has also developed the [SICA COVID-19 Information and Coordination Platform](#).

The following sections briefly describe these initiatives, their results to date, the opportunities and challenges encountered, as well as steps to follow.

## Actions Promoted

### SICA Regional Contingency Plan against COVID19

The Regional Contingency Plan, designed to complement national efforts for the prevention, containment and treatment of COVID-19, is the result of a coordinated effort between SICA bodies.

It aims to achieve a **regional and multisectoral approach to response and recovery that promotes cross-border cooperation**. Due to its dynamic character, it may be modified as the pandemic evolves. Structured around five core themes, it also includes food and nutritional security considerations, along with micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs). It has a gender focus that considers the protection of women's rights. The plan includes a forecast \$1.9 billion fiscal emergency fund.

CEPREDENAC is responsible for coordinating the primary theme of health and risk management. It is also in charge of overall plan coordination, together with the Council of Ministers of Health of Central America and the Dominican Republic (SE-COMISCA). The plan calls for players to:

- Observe, analyse and communicate information on the regional situation.
- Articulate and facilitate national efforts, including coordination between actors in the health sector, governing civil protection and comprehensive risk management bodies.
- Plan actions for complex cross-border situations from a multi-hazard approach. These include seasonal hazards such as rains and hurricanes, as well as latent hazards of a seismic, geotechnical or anthropic nature.



## **Information and Coordination Platform SICA-COVID-19 (CEPREDENAC)**

The Regional Contingency Plan called for systems to be established to collect data and streamline the flow of standardized information that could then be shared among SICA member states, in coordination with CEPREDENAC. To meet this requirement, CEPREDENAC launched the Information and Coordination Platform SICA-COVID-19. This uses geographic information system mapping software alongside consultation services and digital materials to monitor, manage and report on the impact of the pandemic. This platform forms part of the recently created CEPREDENAC regional situation room that promotes coordination and information sharing among national emergency operations centers (EOCs).

The platform includes hazard, vulnerability, exposure and capacity inventory components. It displays data on the number of confirmed cases, recovered patients and deaths. Hospital information shows the number of available ICU beds and ventilators for assisted breathing, isolation centres and national support centres.

It also enables logistics calculations, identifies land, sea and airport coordinates and shows demographic data disaggregated by country and sex. The platform maps vulnerable populations and identifies complex scenarios, forecasts and statistics. It also provides a tool to visualize climate hazards, exposure to earthquakes and the presence of fires, among other hazards.

## **Multisectoral and regional coordination and exchange**

A virtual dialogue, entitled “The Americas and the Caribbean Regarding the COVID-19 Pandemic: Towards the comprehensive management of disaster risk reduction” was organised by SICA to encourage civil protection and comprehensive risk management governing bodies to share their experiences.

Participants included high-level representatives from national risk management systems, regional organizations and strategic partners from the Americas and the Caribbean region.

They agreed on the need to strengthen regional coordination through a unified and collaborative approach

that facilitates the exchange of knowledge, challenges and experiences. Participants emphasized the need to involve local governments and communities, particularly the most vulnerable, in all phases of disaster risk management.

This would cover areas from response and recovery to the design and development of activities and programmes for mitigation and prevention. They also insisted on the need of a systemic approach to risk analysis. This would make it possible to effectively inform decision-making along with response and recovery measures, while simultaneously transforming behaviours at all levels of society.

In addition, CEPREDENAC has encouraged consultations and the exchange of experiences through public webinars with countries such as Cuba that had already adopted quarantine or social isolation processes.

# Regional Contingency Plan

## Initial Results

### Regional Contingency Plan

The main results of the plan to date are summarized below:

- Acquisition of COVID-19 test kits, distributed among all the countries in the region. This was carried out through the Joint Negotiation for the Purchase of Medicines and Medical Supplies (COMISCA). It was made possible thanks to SICA management in collaboration with the Republic of Korea.
- Approval of the emergency fund. The Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI) granted an emergency fund of \$8 million (\$1 million for each SICA member country), thus strengthening national response capacities to attend the crisis.
- Incorporation of provisions to ensure the protection of vulnerable groups. This includes recommendations on the separation of men and women in quarantine centers and health services. It also highlights security measures in border areas to prevent adults, children and adolescents from becoming the victims of kidnapping, capture, trafficking or other types of crime.
- Activation of existing national mechanisms in each country. To maximize the resources of respective risk management systems, existing mechanisms for inter-institutional coordination, information monitoring, community and logistical support, and the management of humanitarian action are being used and adapted. "An effective articulation between health and risk management has been achieved, notably through the activation of national EOCs to reinforce the flow of information that results in decision-making," said Claudia Herrera, CEPREDENAC executive secretary.
- Communication strategy. CEPREDENAC, together with COMISCA, SICA and the International Regional Organization for Agricultural Health (OIRSA) has developed a communication strategy to avoid confusion and misinformation. This can be undermining public confidence, increasing fear and anxiety and hindering response measures. The organizations also called for greater reliance on official sources. The strategy covers communications on coronavirus and topics such as the safety of health workers and first responders. It also refers to border populations, gender-based violence and mental health.
- Regional mechanism for humanitarian assistance in the event of disasters in the Central American Integration System (MecReg - SICA). This is ready to be activated as needed and its procedures are being updated for this crisis.
- Opening of a repatriation corridor. Humanitarian flights were organized for the citizens of the region.

### Initial results of the information and coordination platform

- Comprehensive and collaborative mitigation response and strategy. The consolidation of regional information through accurate statistics results in more tailored actions by countries, in addition to promoting international cooperation. The platform allows for the monitoring of risk conditions — social, economic and environmental — of the most exposed and vulnerable groups, communities and areas. Other layers of information around floods, earthquakes, fires etc. have been integrated in order to apply a multi-hazard approach to preparedness, response and recovery.
- Promotion of citizen participation. As an open and public source, the platform allows users to customize statistics and data to develop their own projections.

- Creation of new partnerships in the region. NASA was responsible for integrating the complex scenario model and has strengthened the digital tool by sharing its satellite information. This is also strengthens the recently-created CEPREDENAC regional situation room.

**Virtual dialogue: “The Americas and the Caribbean Regarding the COVID-19 Pandemic: Towards the comprehensive management of Disaster Risk Reduction”**

- This dialogue enabled national disaster risk management authorities to share ideas on the role each national and sub-regional agency has played and the value added through the efficient use of resources. It also highlighted how they had coordinated with other institutions involved in response, notably those in the health and social protection sectors.
- It emphasized coordinated response approaches and proposed to continue the dialogue to boost the exchange of information and promotion of regional synergies,

## **Opportunities and challenges**

While the Regional Contingency Plan was conceived as a short-term strategy, it sets out medium and long-term proposals for the recovery period. It is an opportunity for dialogue with key actors, from both inside and outside SICA, to build a comprehensive approach to recovery processes that address the contextual challenges of Central America and the Dominican Republic. These revolve mainly around food insecurity, human mobility, urbanization, insecurity and violence.

The implementation and monitoring of the Regional Contingency Plan has led to active collaboration between various SICA bodies. Strong leadership has come from the SICA general secretariat, facilitated in part by teleworking. This has also strengthened the relationship and coordination with civil society and private sector actors. For example, a specific programme was able to reach MSMEs through CENTROMYPE.

The coordination of actions at the local, national and regional level presents challenges and opportunities at e-

-ach level of the framework. The plan promotes coordination and cooperation, as well as the appropriate decentralization of responsibilities and resources according to specific needs. It understands that while the pandemic is global, the responses are local.

## **Next Steps**

The Regional Contingency Plan is an opportunity to reinforce multisectoral coordination and identify synergies between different strategies. It is implemented through different national initiatives that support multi sectoral plans as a reflection of the broader regional strategies.

Incorporating information on measures adopted by the agricultural sector into the Information and Coordination Platform will help identify the immediate actions needed to protect the value chain, production and access to food. This is being coordinated with relevant SICA institutions and strategic partners such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). The plan also includes the addition of a helpline and psychosocial support center.

Other steps include establishing a monitoring mechanism for multi-hazard conditions in the region, particularly for the rainy and hurricane seasons.

Measures will also consider local, regional and national factors, as well as the private sector, in a bid to update contingency and preparedness planning in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and ensure a multi-hazard approach.

Through this process, civil society and the private sector will play a stronger consultative and participatory role on issues related to all levels of risk management and socioeconomic recovery.

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