

# Strengthening Preparedness for Emergency Response with the Government in Belize

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## Abstract

Countries in the Caribbean are vulnerable to natural disasters and climate change. This is no news to children in Belize, a small country that endures a long hurricane season from June to November every year. To help the national actors better protect the lives of children in emergencies, UNICEF collaborated with the Government of Belize to hold a first-of-its-kind emergency preparedness and response workshop in the country in 2018. This workshop paved the way for establishing close working relationships with the government counterparts around preparedness and disaster risk reduction. UNICEF Belize built on this momentum and organized a series of knowledge transfer and capacity development activities, and was able to foster a strong alliance with the Government of Belize based on mutual respect.

## Context

A small, upper-middle income country with a population of 390,000, Belize has experienced significant economic transformations in recent decades. However, its economy and human capital remain vulnerable to natural disasters and climate change. The country endures a long hurricane season from June to November every year. During this period, approximately half of the population living in low-lying coastal areas are confronted with significantly elevated risks of loss of livelihoods, access to basic social services, or even lives. The most recent tropical storm to hit the country was Hurricane Earl which impacted more than 3,000 households in Belize, Orange Walk, Cayo and Stann Creek districts in August 2016. The total estimated economic impact of Hurricane Earl on service delivery, production, infrastructure and the natural environment was about US\$85 million dollars (50 per cent of the country's GDP or total earnings in 2016), resulting in a negative economic growth rate from 3.4 per cent in 2015 to -0.6 per cent at the end of 2016.

To fight against the disaster risks and protect lives and

livelihoods in crises, the Government of Belize established the National Emergency Management Organization (NEMO). The coordination of NEMO is elevated to the highest level, with the Prime Minister as the Chairperson and the Cabinet Secretary assuming the responsibility of the Secretary. NEMO is comprised of 13 committees represented by technical officers from the line ministries, overseeing sectors such as early warning, search and rescue, shelter, damage assessment, relief supplies, and foreign assistance. The committee structure is decentralized to the village level. The national emergency coordination structure forms the architecture through which inter-agency support, defined in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) cluster coordination model, is provided.

United Nations and other international organizations in Belize established the United Nations Emergency Technical Team (UNETT) to better support NEMO in emergency response and strengthen the inter-agency collaboration in humanitarian settings. UNETT member organizations rotate to assume responsibilities as a chair.

UNICEF Belize was the chair of UNETT until 2018. During this time, UNICEF Belize identified the needs and priorities for capacity development in collaboration with NEMO, collectively developed a UNETT work plan, and formulated an inter-agency contingency plan.

## Actions

### *EPP onboarding for UNICEF Belize staff*

In 2017, UNICEF New York Headquarters (NYHQ) Office of Emergency Programming (EMOPS) introduced a [Procedure on Emergency Preparedness and Response](#) to enable effective and timely response to humanitarian crises. EMOPS also launched the [Emergency Preparedness Platform \(EPP\)](#), a new online platform for COs to operationalize the preparedness procedure. With the support from the UNICEF Latin America and Caribbean Regional Office (LACRO), colleagues from UNICEF Belize received training on the four-step preparedness process ranging from analyzing risks, building scenarios, determining UNICEF response, to undertaking minimum preparedness actions, and familiarized themselves with the EPP.

Through the training, UNICEF Belize quickly recognized that building national capacities is essential for robust emergency readiness. The country office also realized that its preparedness actions had to be aligned with those of the government for efficient use of limited resources. UNICEF Belize, therefore, decided to transfer the new knowledge to the government counterparts. The office also envisioned that a joint workshop with the government would accelerate its advocacy for realizing children's rights in emergency contexts.

### *Preparedness and simulation workshop with NEMO*

UNICEF Belize, with the support of LACRO, collaborated with the Ministry of Labour, Local Government and Rural Development to hold a first-of-its-kind emergency preparedness and response workshop for NEMO, line ministry officials, and civil society partners on 13-16 March 2018. About 40 participants received an overview of global humanitarian architecture; familiarized themselves with programmatic and operational preparedness and response actions in UNICEF-supported sectors; and were informed of key processes and products in humanitarian response, such as humanitarian performance monitoring, inter-agency flash appeal, and UNICEF Humanitarian Action for Children (HAC). UNICEF Belize colleagues, LACRO emergency specialist, and a colleague from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) co-facilitated the sessions.



The tilted brown home (centre) was housing six children during the night of Hurricane Earl. At 10.30 p.m., the home started to collapse, and the family had to seek refuge at a neighbour's home. © UNICEF/Belize/2016/SSuwannachairop

A distinct component of the preparedness workshop was an interactive exercise based on a real-life scenario where children's lives were at stake during a catastrophic flood. The participants were tasked with designing, implementing, and coordinating rapid and effective response interventions to save and protect the affected children and their families. This participatory exercise effectively complemented the training sessions and helped the participants internalize the learning.

The workshop also provided an opportunity to strengthen the alliance with the Government of Belize, which UNICEF has effectively leveraged. The two-year rolling work plan between UNICEF and NEMO is an example illustrating the close partnership between the two entities. The rolling work plan was signed as a result of the workshop in which UNICEF and NEMO collectively identified critical actions and solutions for improved preparedness for children, adolescents and their families in Belize.

One lesson that emerged from the workshop was the need for a better understanding of the UN system by the government stakeholders. Specifically, NEMO officials expressed difficulty in comprehending the complex inter-agency humanitarian coordination structure, as well as the roles and responsibilities of individual agencies in emergency contexts. Ensuring clear communication and awareness was instrumental in generating government support for the UN organizations and their operations. UNICEF as the chair of UNETT consulted partner UN agencies to address this issue.



UNICEF and its public sector partners work at honing Belize's emergency response during milestone 4-day workshop © UNICEF/Belize/2018/13Productions

### ***Second workshop convening all government and UN actors***

Under the leadership of UNICEF Belize, and in response to a specific request from NEMO, UNETT organized a second workshop with NEMO in July 2018. The objective of the second workshop was to convene the government and UN stakeholders, discuss broader disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation, and agree on standards to make humanitarian response more inclusive of vulnerable populations. It was the first forum that the government counterparts from NEMO committees at national and sub-national levels, all UN agencies, and civil society organizations (CSOs) in Belize were brought together for, to focus exclusively on specific challenges affecting the response. UN agencies presented the global policies and conceptual frameworks defining their mandate and showed how they can support the inclusion of children, women, elderly, and persons with disability across the humanitarian programming cycle.

Throughout the workshop, the need for rapid data and reporting surfaced repeatedly. The evaluation of humanitarian response to Hurricane Earl in 2016 had indeed revealed that a lack of reliable data was a major hindrance to mounting an effective action. The workshop therefore dedicated several sessions on going through existing rapid needs assessments and sectoral assessments, discussing various data sources, and reviewing data collection tools for the assessments. Many government stakeholders learned about the importance and value-add of collecting, analyzing, and releasing data in a timely manner and that a standardized needs assessment can accelerate data collection, facilitate preparation of an appeal, and help mobilizing resources.

**The [training report](#) prepared by NEMO captures the objective and content of the training as well as discussions and agreed way forward.**

### ***Preparedness workshops, supply and commodity planning as part of the continued capacity building of the government***

Capitalizing on the momentum from the two workshops, UNICEF Belize provided NEMO and line ministries with knowledge, resources and tools. The office also was able to showcase to the government partners how to internalize preparedness into a sector-specific response. For example, the Child Protection section trained the NEMO emergency committee shelter managers on creating and managing safe spaces for children and women. The training created further demand for other programming approaches for child protection in emergencies. In response, UNICEF has strengthened the capacity of the shelter managers, teachers, and municipal officers on the provision of psychosocial support to children and families affected by disasters.

The office also rolled out the “[Return to Happiness](#)” programme designed to support children recover from humanitarian crisis or other traumatic events through a series of interactions and activities for them. These interventions allow them to gradually process their experiences, reduce their anxieties, and regain normal happy and healthy lives.

The series of knowledge transfer activities has offered the national and local government actors with adequate skills to appropriately care for children affected by disasters. Furthermore, to enshrine government ownership in this matter, UNICEF has supported NEMO in establishing the National Protocol for Integrated Protection of Children and Adolescents in Emergency and Disaster Situations. The Protocol, expected to be launched in December 2019, will serve as a normative and operational guide for government agencies, the UN system, civil society organizations, and the private sector for protecting the rights of children and adolescents across the stages of prevention, preparedness, response and recovery in disaster situations in Belize.

NEMO, having reviewed its status of emergency preparedness based on the workshops, made an itemized request to UNETT for financial and technical support in training and supply procurement. UNICEF Belize was one of the first agencies to respond. Knowing the government's supply needs helped UNICEF integrate some of the essential



commodities – such as hygiene kits, water purification tablets, or disability-inclusive toilets – into its supply planning. In addition, UNICEF was able to engage with suitable private sector providers early to ensure timely communication and prepositioning of essential commodities for rapid deployment – an essential collaboration given UNICEF's lack of warehousing and limited in-country logistics management capacity.

One of the items NEMO requested was tablets for mobile data collection. Recognizing the value of data in humanitarian contexts, NEMO was keen to improve its damage and needs assessments, and train district coordination teams on administering electronic surveys. UNICEF promptly provided financial and logistical support in procuring the tablets and helped revise the assessment questionnaires to make them more children- and women-friendly. Through continued engagement, NEMO identified UNICEF as a key partner and appreciated the innovative tools and solutions UNICEF has brought to the table.

As a result of this sustained collaboration, the level of preparedness, knowledge, and skills of government partners increased markedly. Thankfully, no large-scale disaster has occurred in Belize since Hurricane Earl. However, even if a crisis hits, UNICEF Belize and NEMO are now better able to deliver life-saving support to children and families rapidly and efficiently. Moreover, thanks to the robust partnership, NEMO looks to drawing from UNICEF global standards and best practices on emergency preparedness and response and elevating its professionalism and capacity.

## Learnings and Recommendations

### *Build your relationships based on mutual respect.*

Preparedness is best achieved when national partners, such as NEMO in Belize, work in tandem with the broader humanitarian community. This is not always straightforward in middle-income countries or countries with strong

governance where the national government leads the emergency response. It is important for the government actors to understand the complementary role of the UN system and perceive the UN entities as trusted partners.

UNICEF Belize earned this trust by proactively engaging NEMO to share its knowledge; listening to and addressing the government concerns; building a dialogue and establishing shared accountability on emergency preparedness; collectively mapping out available resources; and sustaining and expanding its engagement beyond preparedness. By doing so, UNICEF positioned itself as a valued partner to the Government of Belize across the humanitarian-development continuum. Such a strong alliance is beneficial to all stakeholders in a small country like Belize, as the limited number of actors can pool their resources and knowledge together for a common goal.

### *Preparing for a 6-month hurricane season remains a challenge.*

The hurricane season lasts half of the year in Belize, leaving UNICEF and NEMO a very short time to prepare. By May every year, UNICEF has to take stock of what is available, what is needed, and who can deliver on what action, and develop a preparedness plan, before rapidly transitioning into response. The narrow window of opportunity, coupled with limited human and financial resources, act as constraints. To address this, UNICEF Belize has to remain agile, pragmatic, and strategic.

Fully aware of value the of simulations, UNICEF Belize is committed to run real-life simulation exercises during its routine preparedness planning with the Government of Belize and at the inter-agency level, with support from LACRO and OCHA. The office is also developing standby agreements with CSO partners and introducing emergency clauses in existing Programme Cooperation Agreements, to improve the collective capacity to prepare for and respond to humanitarian crises in Belize.

**More information on emergency preparedness and response can be found in [UNICEF Procedure](#) and [Guidance Note](#).**

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Three-year-old Alishia laughs with her mother, Keisha Gentle, and her brother, 17-year-old Andrew, as they lift her up over a puddle on a sidewalk in Belize City. © UNICEF/UN033879/LeMoyne

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