



Jamaica, like the rest of the Caribbean, is now at the mid-point of the hurricane season, a time when high winds and sustained rainfall can cause severe damage to communities, and negatively impact the economies of affected countries.

In many cases, hillside communities suffer from landslides which, aside from dislocating residents, sometimes lead to death, and the recovery period always places pressure on state resources and institutions. Minimising the impact of hurricanes and weather systems therefore becomes a priority for the Government of Jamaica.

The Office of Disaster Preparedness and Emergency Management (ODPEM), an agency of the government, has been carrying out several activities aimed at achieving that goal. Two of these are the Management of Slope Stability in Communities (MoSSiC) project and the Building Disaster Resilient Communities (BDRC) project. Partnerships with local and overseas stakeholders have been undertaken to minimise the impact of hurricanes on vulnerable communities.

Bedward Gardens, a small district in the greater August Town area of Kingston, is the third of four communities identified under the three-year MoSSiC project, which began with Harbour Heights, in East Rural St. Andrew. The project is funded by the World Bank, through a US\$2.37 million grant from the Japanese Social Development Fund, an affiliate of the World Bank.

Before the MoSSiC project can begin, a Vulnerability Capability Assessment (VCA) of the community has to be done. This is being carried out in Bedward Gardens, spearheaded by the Jamaica Red Cross, under the umbrella of the ODPEM.

Director General of ODPEM, Ronald Jackson, explains that VCAs provide an overview of a community's vulnerability. More specifically, VCAs provide an index or a ranking, which then gives the state the ability to identify and pinpoint exactly where the attention needs to be placed and where investments are needed in addressing the risk and vulnerability a community may face, he notes.

“If it is that they are extremely vulnerable and it is that they don’t have, within the community itself, the capital to be able to cope, then we’ll have a clear picture and understanding of how to treat with increasing resilience within those communities,” the Director General explains.

Neil Barrett, an Instructor with the Jamaica Red Cross, who specialises in conducting VCAs in communities, explains that before any international multi-lateral agency is willing to grant funding for development work, an assessment, detailing the history of the community, its current status and where it wants to go, has to be done. Bedward Gardens, he advised, is ideally suited for such a project.

“It’s a stepping stone in getting the community organised and having some knowledge of disaster management. This project [Bedward Gardens] is being done to pave the way so that the MoSSiC, through ODPEM, can be implemented,” he adds.

Meanwhile, Mr. Jackson points out that VCAs are used to source funds or to validate funding already secured for interventions. In the context of the Landslide Risk Reduction Project, those funds are already garnered, so the VCA becomes a validation tool and helps the State pinpoint where to invest in capacity building.

“It’s more than that. What it does now is to allow us to have a baseline as to where Bedward Gardens and other such communities are. At the end of our intervention, based on what we find in the VCA, we will be able to design the specific community intervention, not just mitigation, but in terms of building capacity,” he adds.

Bedward Gardens is bordered by the University of the West Indies, August Town and the greater Papine area. Because it is shadowed by a long hillside range, it is exposed to numerous land slippages. The community is also bordered by the Hope River and the large volume of silt that comes down in the river causes the bed to rise, which leads to flooding in sections of the community.

A two-day workshop was held earlier this month to sensitise residents about the strategies to

be utilised and get them acquainted with methods and best practices of data collection. It was also used to set up a Community Disaster Risk Management Team. Forming the team is a participatory process. This means community members are trained and given the skills, tools, and approaches to continue the process as they develop their community disaster plan, since this is also an integral part of community development.

The data collected by volunteers will not be restricted only to disaster mitigation, but will be used for the future development of the community. The data will facilitate a mapping of the community and the development of a hazard map. Following this, ODPEM will stage a training exercise for members of the community in areas such as land search and rescue, and first aid. They will also assist in developing the community disaster plan to ensure that any development taking place will be based on sound data.

“So, the exercise will also be used to find out the population, housing arrangements, land tenure, road infrastructure, location and status of land impediments, location and status of the elderly and to interview residents on the history of the community. The information gathered will be useful, not only for the MoSSiC project but for any other agency wanting to carry out development work in Bedward Gardens in the future,” Mr. Jackson says.

Community members are delighted that efforts are being made to generate more development for them. Hugh Wilson has been part of the community for years and thinks the workshop and the effort being made will go a far way to develop the community.

“It will impact the community in such a way that people will have better living conditions. When it rains heavily, a lot of people suffer damage to their homes and other personal property because of landslides or flooding. So, I think it is very good for the community. If we start with this, I see it leading to other things that will better the community,” he tells JIS News.

Another resident, Chant’ea Lyle, says attending the workshop and participating in the exercises was a great learning experience for her and she was happy she took the time to attend.

“It is very useful to us in the community, because most of the resources we didn’t have. Talking with the people who hosted the workshop, I realise they will help, and the training will

definitely lead to the betterment of the community, so I am very grateful,” she adds.