

Director General of the Office of Disaster Preparedness and Emergency Management (ODPEM), Ronald Jackson, says the development of a comprehensive national risk reduction strategy to build resilience to disasters, is vital to the country's sustained economic and social growth.

He argued that unless the impacts of hazards are minimised, they will continue to affect Jamaica's social, economic and environmental development.

Mr. Jackson was speaking during a Country Risk Management stakeholders' consultation workshop on August 29 at the Jamaica Conference Centre, downtown Kingston.

The workshop, organised by ODPEM, HelpAge International and the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection (ECHO), was held in an effort to develop a country document for disaster risk reduction for Jamaica as part of the national development plan, Vision 2030 Jamaica.

Mr. Jackson informed that under Vision 2030, the aim is to reduce the cost of damage caused by disasters to less than one per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 2030, compared to the 2007 baseline of 3.3 per cent.

"On the face of it, it seems like a very small leap, but if we recognise that between the period of 1999, maybe 2000 to 2009, we were experiencing losses roughly between 2.3 and 2.5 per cent of GDP...and we were growing, within that region, from negative to just barely positive one per cent," he remarked.

He added, "It's going to be a significant struggle going to 2030, if we do not unify our forces and our resources behind this broader national strategy and more importantly, the national country work programme, which is where we're going to be seeing the day-to-day annual investment and changes."

The national risk reduction strategy is being designed by ODPEM and its stakeholders for submission to Cabinet. Mr. Jackson said the hope is that the strategy will “become the roadmap that all of us – sectors, government, NGOs (non-governmental organisations) and the community will work together collectively to achieve.”

Among the objectives are: to enhance community capacity to deal effectively with the adverse effects of disasters; mainstream disaster risk management at national and parish levels of governance and into key sectors; utilise disaster risk management information to build a culture of safety at all levels; and strengthen response and recovery systems.

The development of a Disaster Risk Reduction country document for Jamaica falls under the ‘Helping Vulnerable Populations and Communities to Manage Risks Associated with Hurricanes and Floods’ project, which is being funded by ECHO and implemented by HelpAge and ODPEM. The vulnerable populations project will take place in 10 communities in the parishes of St. Catherine and Portland.

Regional Director, HelpAge International, Jeffrey James said the country document is expected to present a holistic vision of disaster risk reduction at the national level, and as such, it should reflect the input of all stakeholders involved in disaster risk reduction in Jamaica.

The exercise, he said, forms part of the 2011/2012 Disaster Preparedness Program of the European Community Humanitarian Office (DIPECHO) Action Plan for the Caribbean, which is funded by ECHO. “This is the eighth round of projects that ECHO is supporting in the Caribbean,” he informed.

The present action plan includes 11 projects, four in Haiti, three in the Dominican Republic, three regional projects and one in Jamaica.

Mr. James also informed that the country document is expected to provide a comprehensive overview of the status of disaster risk reduction in the country; the progress made in reducing risk; the definition of priorities and strategies; the major challenges faced in reducing the loss of lives; as well as the economic social and environmental impacts of risks.