

Enhancing Response Operations Through OFDA's Surge Capacity Program

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When disasters strike multiple countries in a region, efforts to ensure swift and effective simultaneous responses can face challenges. Through a recently developed surge capacity program in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), OFDA is able to quickly enlarge its human resource base to respond to sudden-onset disasters faster, better, and in more countries at once. The program is part of the Regional Disaster Assistance Program (RDAP), through which the OFDA/LAC regional office in San José, Costa Rica, responds to disasters and provides guidance to populations on disaster risk reduction and preparedness through its network of 20 disaster risk management specialists located throughout the region. In addition to the

network of disaster risk management specialists, the OFDA/LAC regional office boasts a cadre of 124 RDAP on-call disaster management consultants located in 30 countries throughout the LAC region and available to work as needed during times of disaster.

This surge capacity program rapidly augments the on-the-ground presence, reach, and capability of the OFDA team. OFDA can usually activate an emergency team, including one or more disaster management consultants, in less than a day. Following a recommendation from an OFDA disaster risk management specialist conducting initial assessments on the ground, the senior regional advisor at the OFDA/LAC regional office requests the deployment of one or more consultants. The consultants arrive on site within hours to assist in providing a timely and cost-effective response. Once operations end, the surge mechanism is shut off.



OFDA-funded plastic sheeting provides shelter for residents affected by flooding in Bolivia (Photo by Liza Mantilla, USAID).

The surge capacity program is based on a proactive approach to dealing with disasters that combines local capacity building with quick and efficient response operations. Because the surge consultants have previously participated in OFDA risk management training events, they are familiar with the office's mandate, planning processes, decision-making criteria, and problem-solving techniques. In addition, consultants typically are local emergency response professionals who are familiar with the local language and customs and can provide the OFDA team with insight into a country's political and geographic landscapes.

At the same time, working with OFDA staff on a disaster response allows the surge consultants to build upon their knowledge gained in risk management training courses. They return to their jobs empowered by the skills and experience gained through participation in a U. S. Government (USG) disaster response, further enhancing local capacity building efforts and strengthening relationships with OFDA.

In a sense, the surge capacity program expands the OFDA family at little or no cost to the USG. Consultants build and maintain close ties with the OFDA/LAC regional office staff, often informing them about significant events in their respective countries at an early stage, which helps OFDA with early warning, rapid response, and strategic planning.

The surge capacity program was born out of a need to respond to disasters faster and better in a manner consistent with the strategy of the LAC regional team to build local capacities to respond to disasters. The idea for creating a surge capacity mechanism for the LAC region dates back to 2005, a particularly active year in terms of disasters and one which prompted the OFDA/LAC regional team to seek ways to improve its ability to respond to simultaneous events in different countries. Implementing the program through the RDAP's risk management framework strengthens the overall success of the surge capacity program.

The OFDA/LAC team plans to continue strengthening the surge capacity program. The next step is to add to the roster more technically specialized consultants, including doctors, engineers, public works specialists, and others whom OFDA can place on a disaster

assessment team in accordance with the type and scope of the emergency at hand.

The team initiated the surge capacity program in FY 2006, and refined it in FY 2007. By FY 2008, the OFDA/LAC team routinely employed surge consultants during disaster response operations. The humanitarian responses to Tropical Storm Noel in Haiti and the Dominican Republic in late 2007, the massive flooding events in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Guatemala in the first half of 2008, and a string of storms in the Caribbean later in the year all relied on surge capacity personnel.

The Caribbean

In Haiti in late 2007, three French-speaking surge consultants who had previously led training activities in the country assisted an OFDA/LAC staff member conduct damage evaluations and assess needs following Tropical Storm Noel. In response to the effects of Noel in the Dominican Republic, three surge consultants, including a retired 37-year veteran of USAID and two local consultants, joined the OFDA emergency team.

In the same region in August and September 2008, four storms created a humanitarian emergency in Haiti and caused damages in Jamaica and the Dominican Republic. The OFDA/LAC office hired a total of five surge consultants over a period of several weeks to augment the DART deployed to Haiti and to coordinate the more than \$30 million USG humanitarian response to the widespread flooding in the Caribbean nation. Two other surge consultants helped coordinate the USG relief response in Jamaica around the same time.

Central America

In Guatemala in late July 2008, a local surge consultant was hired to conduct assessments in the field following floods and landslides in the department of Zacapa. Because the consultant knew the area well, the OFDA team could quickly verify disaster reports and respond to the situation. Meanwhile, the disaster risk management specialist remained in the capital to help coordinate the USG response with Government of Guatemala emergency management officials.