RESEARCH BRIEFING

Multi-Agency Coordination in Caribbean Disaster Response:

Frameworks, Challenges, and Emerging Best Practices

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Caribbean region faces unique challenges in disaster management as one of the most disaster-prone areas globally. Over the past seven decades, more than 324 disasters have affected Caribbean Small Island Developing States (SIDS), with economies suffering losses six times greater than larger continental nations. This research briefing examines the multi-agency coordination frameworks, mechanisms, and lessons learned from recent major hurricane responses—particularly Hurricane Beryl (2024) and Hurricane Melissa (2025)—to inform the development of more effective disaster coordination systems.

Key Findings

- **Regional Framework Evolution:** CDEMA's Comprehensive Disaster Management Strategy 2014-2024 has established foundational coordination mechanisms, though implementation remains uneven across participating states.
- **Coordination Architecture:** The convergence of CDEMA's Regional Response Mechanism with UN OCHA coordination structures provides a dual-layer system, though interoperability challenges persist.
- **Financial Instruments:** CCRIF SPC has evolved into a critical component of disaster financing, with record payouts of US$85 million following Hurricane Beryl demonstrating the value of parametric insurance.
- **Information Management:** Data silos and fragmented information systems remain persistent barriers to effective coordination, with Trinidad and Tobago's meteorological and national security agencies operating without integrated data-sharing protocols.
- **Civil-Military Integration:** Jamaica's post-Hurricane Melissa restructuring, placing ODPEM under military leadership, represents an emerging model for enhanced logistical coordination.
- **Emerging Technology Solutions:** Integrated platforms such as DizRec demonstrate how bidirectional API architecture can connect donor transparency with government coordination, addressing the ecosystem fragmentation that characterizes existing disaster technology solutions.

1. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

1.1 The Caribbean Vulnerability Context

Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in the Caribbean face disproportionate vulnerability to natural hazards including tropical cyclones, earthquakes, tsunamis, and increasingly, the compounding effects of climate change. The Caribbean region sits squarely within the Atlantic hurricane belt and experiences regular seismic activity, making comprehensive disaster management not merely beneficial but existential.

According to UNDRR data, SIDS are among the world's most disaster-prone countries, with the Caribbean experiencing more than half of all disasters affecting island states globally. The 2024 Atlantic hurricane season reinforced this vulnerability with Hurricane Beryl—the earliest Category 5 hurricane on record—causing catastrophic damage across Grenada, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Jamaica, with up to 98% of infrastructure damaged in some areas.

1.2 The Imperative for Multi-Agency Coordination

Effective disaster response in the Caribbean necessarily involves multiple agencies operating at local, national, regional, and international levels. This multi-layered response architecture creates both opportunities for leveraging diverse capabilities and challenges for coordination. As Rogerio Silva, UNDAC Team Leader, observed during the Hurricane Melissa response: "Coordination is second only to saving lives. I would argue they're inseparable."

The fundamental challenge lies in ensuring that when disasters strike, "every actor—from local communities to international partners—moves in sync." Without seamless coordination, "even the best resources and intentions can collapse into confusion—costing precious time and lives."

2. REGIONAL COORDINATION FRAMEWORK

2.1 CDEMA and the Comprehensive Disaster Management Strategy

The Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA), established in 1991 as CDERA and transitioned to its current form in 2009, serves as the primary regional inter-governmental agency for disaster management in CARICOM. CDEMA's mandate encompasses the full disaster management cycle: prevention and mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery.

Strategic Framework Priorities (2014-2024)

- **Institutional Strengthening:** Building capacity of National Disaster Organizations and the CDEMA Coordinating Unit
- **Knowledge Management:** Supporting evidence-based decision making through improved data systems
- **CDM Mainstreaming:** Integrating disaster management across key sectors including health, tourism, agriculture, and physical planning
- **Building Disaster Resilience:** With gender, climate change, ICT, and environmental sustainability as cross-cutting themes

Governance Structure

The CDM Governance Mechanism promotes structured and harmonized approaches through several key bodies:

- **CDM Coordination and Harmonization Council:** Comprises development partners, sector leaders, participating states, and private sector representatives
- **Technical Advisory Committee (TAC):** Includes National Disaster Coordinators and specialized regional organizations in meteorological and seismological fields
- **Six Sector Sub-Committees:** Covering health, education, tourism, agriculture, physical planning, and finance (though finance remains non-operational)

2.2 The Regional Response Mechanism (RRM)

CDEMA's Regional Response Mechanism provides the operational framework for coordinating disaster response across participating states. A key principle underlying the RRM is respect for state sovereignty—external assistance supports rather than supplants national coordination mechanisms.

The enhanced RRM restructures the Regional Coordination Centre to include a strong logistics component supported by regional military forces. CDEMA's CARICOM Disaster Relief Unit (CDRU), composed of discipline forces members, provides humanitarian support to participating states.

2.3 International Coordination: UN OCHA and the Cluster System

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) maintains presence in the Caribbean through its Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean (ROLAC) and the Humanitarian Advisory Team in Barbados. OCHA provides critical support for humanitarian coordination, particularly during large-scale emergencies that exceed national response capacities.

Key OCHA Functions

- **UNDAC Deployment:** Rapid deployment of disaster assessment and coordination teams within 12-48 hours of request
- **CERF Allocation:** Mobilization of Central Emergency Response Fund resources for immediate humanitarian needs
- **Information Management:** Situation reporting, needs assessments, and coordination of humanitarian response plans
- **Civil-Military Coordination:** UN-CMCoord mechanisms to ensure appropriate interaction between humanitarian and military actors

The Cluster System in Caribbean Response

The humanitarian cluster system, activated by the Emergency Relief Coordinator at the request of the Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator, provides sectoral coordination during major emergencies. Eleven clusters cover areas including protection, shelter, health, logistics, and early recovery, each led by designated UN agencies.

- **IOM:** Co-leads Camp Coordination/Camp Management (CCCM) cluster for natural disaster displacement
- **WFP:** Leads logistics cluster with pre-positioned supplies in Barbados hub
- **PAHO:** Leads health cluster and coordinates Emergency Medical Team deployments

2.4 CDEMA-OCHA Interoperability

The OCHA-CDEMA Joint Interoperability Manual represents efforts to strengthen coordination between these key regional and international actors. The manual addresses the need for "enhanced interoperability between CDEMA and OCHA as the key coordination actors in the Caribbean" to ensure "effective and efficient use of limited human and financial resources" while "minimizing duplications in assessments and relief efforts."

3. NATIONAL COORDINATION FRAMEWORKS: JAMAICA CASE STUDY

3.1 Jamaica's Disaster Management Architecture

Jamaica's Office of Disaster Preparedness and Emergency Management (ODPEM) serves as the National Disaster Organization, established in 1980 following devastating floods in western Jamaica. ODPEM operates under the Disaster Risk Management Act of 2015, which provides comprehensive legal authority for disaster management activities.

Key Legal Provisions

- **Section 16:** Establishes National Disaster Risk Management Council
- **Section 17:** Mandates National Disaster Response Coordination Plan including procedures for international cooperation
- **Section 26:** Grants Prime Minister authority to declare disaster areas

3.2 National Disaster Committee Structure

The National Disaster Committee (NDC), chaired by the Prime Minister, serves as Jamaica's senior disaster planning body. Sub-committees address specific functional areas:

- **Administration, Finance and Public Service:** Co-chaired by Ministry of Finance and ODPEM
- **Infrastructure, Recovery and Rehabilitation:** Co-chaired by Ministry of Transport and ODPEM, with National Works Agency leading damage assessment
- **Public Information and Education:** Co-chaired by Jamaica Information Service and ODPEM
- **Welfare/Shelter and Relief Clearance:** Co-chaired by Ministry of Labour and Social Security and ODPEM
- **Health Services:** Chaired by Ministry of Health and Wellness

3.3 Comprehensive Disaster Risk Management Policy 2020-2040

Jamaica's long-term national disaster risk management policy establishes five strategic goals:

- **Goal 1:** Mainstreaming DRM across national policies and sectoral planning, integrating DRR with climate change adaptation
- **Goal 2:** Strengthening coordination for preparedness, response, and recovery at national and local levels
- **Goal 3:** Enhancing public-private partnerships
- **Goal 4:** Strengthening results-oriented programming
- **Goal 5:** Achieving resilience vision by 2040

4. RECENT HURRICANE RESPONSES: LESSONS LEARNED

4.1 Hurricane Beryl (July 2024)

Hurricane Beryl represented an unprecedented challenge as the earliest Category 5 hurricane on record, forming in late June 2024 and rapidly intensifying with a 90 mph increase in wind speed over just 36 hours. The storm made landfall in Grenada and St. Vincent and the Grenadines on July 1, 2024, before tracking through Jamaica on July 3.

Coordination Response Architecture

- **Regional Level:** CDEMA activated Regional Coordination Plan on October 8, 2024, with Regional Response Mechanism coordinating international assistance
- **International Support:** UNDAC teams deployed; CERF allocated US$1.5 million; Regional Overview and Response Plan established for US$9 million
- **Cluster Activation:** IOM requested by CDEMA to lead Shelter/NFI thematic working group
- **Pre-positioning:** WFP's pre-positioned supplies in Barbados hub enabled food kit delivery within days, cutting lead times by up to 10 days

Key Lessons

- **Pre-positioning Value:** "When a disaster hits, we're not starting from scratch—we're already on the start line." (Andrew Jackson, WFP)
- **Informal Networks:** Private sailing community ("yachties") formed flotilla to ferry supplies between islands, demonstrating value of community coordination
- **Early Warning Effectiveness:** St. Vincent and the Grenadines Meteorological Services issued first advisory 6 days before impact; virtual coordination calls with NHC enhanced preparedness

4.2 Hurricane Melissa (October 2025)

Hurricane Melissa struck southwestern Jamaica on October 28, 2025, with winds exceeding 260 km/h (Category 5). The response demonstrated both coordination successes and highlighted areas requiring structural reform.

Coordination Innovations

- **Nightly Coordination Meetings:** Held at Jamaica Pegasus Hotel, growing from handful of responders to standing-room-only gatherings of 140+ humanitarian actors
- **"Catch of the Day" Format:** Each sector lead provided critical updates needed for partners to act, creating efficient information flow
- **ODPEM Restructuring:** Reassigned to Office of the Prime Minister following Hurricane Melissa (October 28, 2025); new head seconded from Jamaica Defence Force

Structural Reforms Post-Melissa

Prime Minister Holness emphasized the JDF's "best in class" regional logistics capability, stating: "The JDF gives the legs and arms to the management functions of the emergency. So it makes sense that there is seamless coordination between the JDF and ODPEM."

Key reforms include development of "huge logistics software capability" to monitor inventory, coordinate supply movement, and plan resupply operations, addressing "long-standing challenges in managing large-scale relief efforts."

5. COORDINATION CHALLENGES

5.1 Information Management and Data Sharing

Research consistently identifies information sharing as the primary obstacle to effective multi-agency coordination. Studies demonstrate that "relief workers are often more concerned with receiving information from others than with providing information to others who may benefit."

Specific Challenges Identified

- **Data Silos:** In Trinidad and Tobago, the Meteorological Office and National Security apparatus operate "with limited data-sharing strategy and without an early warning memorandum of understanding"
- **System Incompatibility:** Humanitarian clusters "often choose systems that lock data in tools and formats that cannot be easily shared"
- **Governance Fragmentation:** In Mauritius, "multiple agencies managing disaster response, climate policy, and environmental conservation separately" creates "data silos and coordination gaps"

5.2 Structural and Institutional Barriers

- **Resource Constraints:** SIDS lack human and economic resources for comprehensive emergency management
- **Uneven Implementation:** Despite government efforts to integrate Sendai Framework, "gaps in stakeholder engagement, resource allocation, and governance limit DRR effectiveness"
- **Reporting Inconsistencies:** "Year after year, incomplete data and information is submitted" for DRR activities
- **Local Exclusion:** "Despite localisation aspirations, the cluster system centers around international humanitarian agencies, and excludes local and national organizations from coordination activities"

5.3 SIDS-Specific Challenges

- **Geographic Isolation:** "Shipping into the Caribbean from Europe, Latin America, or the US can take time, especially with infrequent shipping routes and limited port capacity"
- **Infrastructure Vulnerability:** Critical infrastructure damage (airports, ports, telecommunications) can hamper coordination during response
- **Economic Impact:** "Logistics can account for up to half the total cost of landed goods"
- **Debt Burden:** High indebtedness limits fiscal space for resilience investment; CDEMA supports "exploration of a conversation on debt forgiveness in lieu of setting up national and regional resilience funds"

6. TECHNOLOGY AND INFORMATION SYSTEMS

6.1 Emergency Operations Center Technology

Modern EOCs serve as "communication and coordination hubs designed to increase data management and coordination capabilities." Key technological components include:

- **Video Wall Displays:** Multi-monitor setups aggregating real-time data, maps, and video feeds
- **EOC Information Systems:** Platforms facilitating "data analytics, real-time collaboration on web-based workflows, and sharing of documentation"
- **GIS Integration:** Spatial data infrastructure for hazard mapping and damage assessment
- **Virtual EOC Capabilities:** Enable "participation of specialists and resources from various locations without the need for physical travel"

6.2 Earth Observation and Copernicus Services

CDEMA has leveraged European Union Copernicus services for operational decision-making. Executive Director Elizabeth Riley noted: "The value of Earth Observation data is not theoretical—it has already proven impactful in operational settings. In 2024 alone, Copernicus services were leveraged by the Regional Response Mechanism coordinated by CDEMA to support decision-making and response during Hurricane Beryl."

6.3 Crisis Mapping and Crowdsourcing

The Haiti earthquake response in 2010 demonstrated "how mobile technologies, geospatial data, and citizen-based reporting could influence humanitarian action." Organizations such as OpenStreetMap, Crisis Mappers, and Ushahidi have since been employed in critical emergencies globally.

6.4 Sendai Framework Monitoring

The Sendai Framework Monitor provides online tools for tracking progress against 38 indicators toward seven global targets. The DesInventar Sendai disaster loss data collection tool enables creation of compliant loss databases. However, "inconsistencies in data standards and incomplete reporting hamper regional comparability and collective benchmarking."

6.5 Emerging Integrated Platforms: The DizRec Model

A critical gap identified in competitive analysis of over forty disaster management platforms globally is that no existing solution combines transparent donor-to-victim tracking with real-time

government coordination and volunteer connection. The disaster technology market has matured into specialized silos—emergency operations centers for government coordination, donation platforms for fundraising, volunteer systems for field logistics—but these ecosystems do not communicate with each other.

The DizRec Disaster Relief and Recovery Platform, developed in the aftermath of Hurricane Melissa's devastation of Jamaica, represents an emerging technological response to this challenge. The platform's synchronized two-system architecture addresses the coordination gaps through:

- **Bidirectional API Integration:** Relief donations flow into the recovery side for logistics coordination with full agency visibility, while government-created projects can be funded directly by donors on the relief side
- **Donor-to-Victim Tracking:** Every donation receives a unique tracking identifier that accompanies it through the entire relief chain—from receipt through warehouse staging, customs clearance, logistics distribution, and final delivery to verified recipients
- **Grant-Style Discipline:** Government agencies seeking to surface funding needs to donors must submit structured project documentation including project design, scope, and budget—embedding accountability without the 6-12 month bureaucratic timelines of traditional grant processes
- **Multi-Agency Dashboard:** Unified visibility for all agencies to see resource availability, work assignments, completion status, and coordination needs—preventing duplication and identifying coverage gaps
- **Caribbean-First Payment Processing:** Integration with PowerTranz ensures transaction fees and settlement services retain value within the regional economy rather than leaking to international payment processors

The platform's design for regional scalability enables deployment across CDEMA member states, addressing the coordination challenges that currently fragment Caribbean disaster response. When hurricanes affect multiple islands, a unified platform can coordinate assistance across national boundaries, prevent duplication between national responses, and provide donors with visibility across the entire affected region (Jones, 2025).

7. DISASTER FINANCING AND RISK TRANSFER

7.1 CCRIF SPC: Caribbean Catastrophe Risk Insurance

CCRIF SPC (formerly Caribbean Catastrophe Risk Insurance Facility) represents a groundbreaking innovation in disaster risk financing. Established in 2007 as the world's first multi-country risk pool utilizing parametric insurance, CCRIF has evolved to include 19 Caribbean and 4 Central American government members.

Product Portfolio

- **Tropical Cyclone:** Parametric coverage triggered by storm intensity and modeled losses
- **Earthquake:** Coverage based on seismic event parameters
- **Excess Rainfall:** Coverage for flooding events
- **Fisheries Sector:** Launched 2019 for St. Lucia and Grenada
- **Electric/Water Utilities:** Coverage for critical infrastructure operators
- **Fluvial Flood:** New product for 2025/26 policy year

Hurricane Beryl Payouts

CCRIF issued record payouts of US$85 million following Hurricane Beryl through 12 individual parametric policies across five countries. Grenada received US$43 million from sovereign policies plus US$12.6 million for electric/water utilities and fisheries sectors. Since inception, CCRIF has made approximately US$360 million in total payouts.

7.2 Emerging Financing Mechanisms

- **Climate Resilient Debt Clauses:** Developed in the Caribbean, first tested in response to Hurricane Beryl
- **CERF Allocations:** UN Central Emergency Response Fund providing rapid funding; US$1.5 million allocated for Beryl response
- **Country-Based Pooled Funds:** Supporting over 47 million people worldwide
- **Loss and Damage Fund:** Operationalized at COP28 to address climate-related impacts

8. CIVIL-MILITARY COORDINATION

8.1 Regional Military Capabilities

Nine CDEMA participating states maintain military forces that play important roles in disaster response. Key strengths include organized manpower, communication capabilities, transportation assets, and logistics expertise. The TRADEWINDS exercise series, sponsored by U.S. Southern Command, annually strengthens disaster response and security coordination through the Caribbean Task Force.

8.2 Coordination Principles

UN Civil-Military Coordination (UN-CMCoord) provides the framework for humanitarian-military interaction, ranging from coexistence to cooperation depending on context. Key guidance documents include:

- Oslo Guidelines on Use of Foreign Military and Civil Defence Assets in Disaster Relief
- IASC Non-Binding Guidelines on Use of Military or Armed Escorts for Humanitarian Convoys
- UN-CMCoord Guide for the Military 2.0

8.3 Caribbean Best Practices

PAHO has identified Caribbean civil-military collaboration as best practice, noting that "combined medical teams provide a best-practice example for civil-military health collaboration in the Caribbean as well as in Barbados and Jamaica, where military provide logistic and operational support and health agencies provide clinical care."

Canada-CDEMA MOU (May 2024) formalized mechanisms for Canadian Armed Forces support through the Regional Response Mechanism, enabling tactical support including airport specialist deployment and logistics assistance.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENHANCED COORDINATION

9.1 Information Management

- Develop regional data-sharing protocols with standardized formats enabling cross-agency interoperability
- Invest in centralized disaster information management systems similar to Mauritius DIMS model
- Establish early warning memoranda of understanding between meteorological and emergency management agencies
- Create open-access data platforms for risk assessments and disaster loss databases

9.2 Institutional Strengthening

- Operationalize remaining sector sub-committees under CDM governance mechanism (particularly Finance Sector)
- Strengthen local organization participation in cluster coordination activities
- Adopt programmatic approaches with sustained accompaniment rather than multiple short-term projects
- Enhance coordination between sectors and levels of government for policy coherence

9.3 Preparedness and Response

- Expand pre-positioning of supplies at regional hubs following Barbados model
- Develop and maintain standby agreements with military forces and transportation providers
- Invest in logistics management software for real-time inventory tracking and coordination
- Conduct regular multi-agency exercises and simulations building on TRADEWINDS model

9.4 Financial Resilience

- Expand CCRIF coverage and develop layered risk financing strategies
- Integrate debt reduction and restructuring mechanisms into DRR support frameworks
- Align DRR investments with climate adaptation financing through coordinated funding windows
- Develop contingent liability frameworks with pre-defined financing triggers

9.5 Technology and Innovation

- Leverage Earth observation tools and Copernicus services for operational decision-making
- Develop offline-first architectures for disaster response scenarios with degraded connectivity
- Implement virtual/hybrid EOC capabilities for geographic flexibility and resilience
- Invest in community-based early warning systems and anticipatory action protocols
- Deploy integrated platforms (such as DizRec) that connect donor transparency with government coordination through bidirectional API architecture, addressing the ecosystem fragmentation that currently separates donation platforms from emergency management systems
- Embed grant-style accountability discipline into emergency funding mechanisms without lengthy bureaucratic timelines

10. CONCLUSION

Multi-agency coordination in Caribbean disaster response has evolved significantly over the past two decades, with CDEMA's Regional Response Mechanism and the integration of UN coordination structures providing foundational frameworks. Recent experiences with Hurricane Beryl and Hurricane Melissa have demonstrated both the value of pre-positioned coordination mechanisms and the persistent challenges of information management, local capacity, and resource constraints.

The ten-year review of the Sendai Framework reveals that while deaths from disasters have declined significantly decade-on-decade, the intensification of climate-related hazards and the multi-dimensional vulnerability of SIDS demand continued innovation. The evolution of CCRIF from sovereign-only parametric insurance to sector-specific utility and fisheries coverage demonstrates how financial instruments can adapt to address specific coordination gaps. Similarly, emerging integrated technology platforms like DizRec demonstrate how the persistent accountability gap between donation systems and coordination systems can be bridged through thoughtful architecture design.

Looking forward, the Caribbean region has opportunity to build on demonstrated successes—the Barbados logistics hub, Jamaica's civil-military integration reforms, the CDEMA-OCHA interoperability framework, and emerging technology solutions that operationalize transparency and accountability—while addressing persistent challenges in data sharing, local inclusion, and sustainable financing. As the UN Resident Coordinator for Barbados observed: "Coordination in disaster response is critical. But so is coordination on climate action—before the next [hurricane] forms."

The fundamental lesson from decades of Caribbean disaster experience remains clear: when coordination functions effectively, lives are saved, recovery accelerates, and hope is restored. The frameworks exist; the imperative now is implementation with the urgency that climate change demands. Technology platforms that embed accountability mechanisms in system architecture—providing transparency that deters corruption, mechanisms that reward performance, and participation channels that amplify community voice—represent essential infrastructure for translating ethical principles into operational reality.

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