

Stakeholders on Volcanic Risk Reduction in the Lesser Antilles meet in Montserrat to discuss on volcanic risk contingency planning.



Participants to the Think Tank on Volcanic Risk Reduction in the Lesser Antilles Meeting (Montserrat March 12th- 14th, 2014).
Picture taken by: Sile Pinard-Byrne (Dominica Red Cross DIPECHO Project National Coordinator-Dominica)

Montserrat 12th March 2014 - A group of 22 stakeholders representing 15 institutions and community members, met last week in Montserrat to exchange and discuss on the volcanic risk in the Lesser Antilles and volcanic risk contingency planning. The meeting was specially hosted in Montserrat with the precious support of the Montserrat Volcano Observatory and the warm welcoming of the Montserrat Red Cross.

Thanks to an exceptional authorization of Montserrat authorities with the support of the MVO, the members of the THINK TANK were able to penetrate the exclusion zone, where Plymouth, the former capital of Montserrat, is buried under thousands of tons of ash and debris transported by major lahars.

“Being in Montserrat was important to understand the meaning of volcanic risk. The visit of Plymouth was a unique experience and has allowed us to realize the trauma of the population of a whole territory”, testified Marine LE PAGE, representing French Red Cross Regional office for the Caribbean.

This meeting gathered 22 stakeholders representing 15 regional and local institutions, including:

- National and regional Disaster Management agencies (DMCA, ODM, NEMO and CDEMA),
- A broad representation of the international movement of the Red Cross (Montserrat Red Cross, French Red Cross, Dominica Red Cross, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines Red Cross, and the International Federation of the Red Cross).
- Scientific institutions (Montserrat Volcano Observatory and the Seismic Research Center of the University of the West Indies),
- The United Nations Development Program (UNDP),

- The French Inter-Ministerial Major Estate for the Antilles Zone (EMIZA)
- Local stakeholders and community members.

All are members of the Think Tank for the Volcanic Risk Reduction in the Lesser Antilles, a group created as a space dedicated to discussion and exchange of experience in order to edit recommendations and materials to reduce the volcanic risk in the Lesser Antilles. This Think Tank was set up in September 2013 in the framework of a project named "Preparation of institutional stakeholders and the populations situated in the Lesser Antilles facing volcanic risks" partnering French Red Cross, Dominica Red Cross and St Vincent and the Grenadines Red Cross, funded under the DIPECHO Action Plan for the Caribbean.

"The creation of a THINK TANK addresses the need for consultation around the question of the volcanic risk in the lesser Antilles. To gather all stakeholders involved in volcanic and associated risk management allows to create a special focus on volcanic risk with a space to exchange experiences about the volcanic risk in the very particular context of the Lesser Antilles" stated Mr. Marc Comas, the DIPECHO Regional Coordinator for the /French Red Cross, adding that "The group is open to all the relevant stakeholders involved in the volcanic risk management in the region, such as the disaster management offices, the scientists, the societies of the Red Cross, United Nations agencies and donors. The Think Tank is led by the Red Cross which implemented the initiative under the framework of the DIPECHO Action Plan for the Caribbean. It is expected that the lead of the initiative will also alternate to other institutions".

The objective of the Montserrat meeting was to draw guidelines and recommendations to be shared and applied at different levels in the Lesser Antilles countries and territories affected by Volcanic and associated risks. Three territories are special partners of the project: Montserrat that presents the largest experience of a volcanic eruption the last 19 years with the eruption of the Soufriere hill; Dominica that presents the experience of managing risks in a territory dotted with 9 volcanos ; and St. Vincent & the Grenadines that have also experienced a major volcanic eruption in 1979.

The meeting led to as interesting reflections on how a proper contingency planning makes the difference allowing saving lives on a catastrophic event such as the violent volcanic eruptions produced by the volcanoes of the Lesser Antilles. The Head of Regional civil protection and defense for French territories in the Caribbean, Mr. Denis Lopez, stressed that "to draw a Contingency Plan means to establish a common grammar, a common understanding of the assistance process. It will be the key point to face the aftermath of the future disaster".

The Montserrat meeting was the second event of that kind. The first Think Tank on Volcanic Risk Reduction Strategies was held in the Dominica hosted by Dominica Red Cross last October 2013, focused on reviewing existing educational and informational materials, as well as public awareness and early warning systems.