



## Case Study

### Cuba: A culture of safety



▲ Havana, Cuba: The city has developed a culture of safety in the face of frequent hurricanes.  
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Most local and national governments are ill-equipped to manage and adapt to environmental hazards, including climate variability and climate change. This is a developmental issue, and it makes large sections of urban populations vulnerable to any increase in the frequency or intensity of storms, to increased risk of disease or constraints on water supplies, and to increases in food prices, to which wealthier, better governed cities are typically quick to adapt. A shift from disaster response to disaster preparedness and disaster risk reduction, which would have significant relevance for urban resilience to climate change, has not yet occurred in most city and national level policies.

Cuba is a hurricane-prone island in the Caribbean. When Hurricane Wilma struck in October 2005, this small island managed to evacuate 640,000 people from its path, with just one fatality. The sea charged one kilometer inland and flooded the capital, Havana, yet no one died or was injured. This was not a one-time response, but built upon many years of experience in dealing with hurricanes. In the seven years between 1996 and 2002, six major hurricanes hit Cuba, yet a total of just 16 people died. In each case, hundreds of thousands of people – sometimes 700,000 to 800,000 at a time – were successfully evacuated, often within 48 hours.



The Cuban population has developed a culture of safety. Many ordinary people see themselves as actors with important roles to play in disaster preparation and response. Education and training, a culture of mobilization and social organization, and a government priority to protect human life in emergencies promote this vision. At the heart of Cuba's system is a clear political commitment, at every level of government, to safeguard human life. This allows for a centralized decision-making process alongside a decentralized implementation process equally necessary for effective emergency preparedness and response. The system has been tried and tested so many times that high levels of mutual trust and confidence exist between communities and politicians at every level of the system.

Tangible assets supporting disaster preparedness include: a strong, well-organized civil defense, an efficient early warning system, well-equipped rescue teams, and emergency stockpiles and other resources. Intangible assets are effective local leadership, community mobilization, solidarity among a population that is "disaster aware" and educated about what actions to take, and local participation in evacuation planning.

Source: Simms & Reid, 2006.