

## **Including Children, Adolescents and Youth with Disabilities in Disaster Risk Reduction and Management in Panama**

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### **Introduction**

RET is an international non-governmental organization (INGO) committed to alleviate suffering and catalyze human development in crisis, conflict and fragile contexts. RET builds on its 18 years of experience in providing education, protection and enhancing resilience and self-reliance capacities in emergencies and fragile environments around the world, with a particular focus on young people and women.

One of RET's efforts to protect young people and women has been its active engagement in developing various approaches to Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and Management (DRM) in Latin America and the Caribbean. Because of its focus on the most vulnerable populations, RET observed that the specific needs of persons with disabilities, precisely the ones from children, adolescents and youth are very often not adequately addressed in the response to natural hazards. In order to address this gap and to ensure that no one is left behind, RET is implementing a project in Panama to provide young learners with disabilities with the skills needed to mitigate and overcome disaster risks within the school environment. The project, which is still ongoing, started in 2014.

RET is driven by the paradigm that inclusion should seek the active participation and engagement of persons with disabilities and should acknowledge their specific capabilities and not only their special needs. RET, together with the Panamanian Institute for Special Training (IPHE), has therefore developed different approaches to mainstream inclusive approaches in DRR within the education sector:

1. Strengthening community awareness and mobilization capacity of youth with disabilities, teachers, family members, caregivers, officials, and community leaders on their roles in inclusive disaster risk management.
2. Building capacities to increase individual, community and institutional resilience for inclusive disaster risk management and first response in schools and other public facilities.
3. Developing the necessary tools to institutionalize inclusive disaster risk management (IDRM) in the education sector, and hereby increasing the education sector's resilience in line with Panama's national policies in this area.

The current paper will start with a summary of RET's perspective to including children, adolescents and youth with disabilities in disaster risk reduction and management in Panama. It will then discuss RET's efforts and concrete activities for each of the three

approaches mentioned above, followed by some its concrete outputs and outcomes. The paper will conclude with some remarks on RET's main institutional and community impact identified so far.

## RET and DRRM in Panama

Panama is particularly vulnerable to various natural disasters, including earthquakes, volcanoes, and flooding associated with hurricanes and tropical storms. Disasters caused by environmental incidents pose an additional risk, such as forest fires, as well as industrial incidents like chemical and oil spills. In addition, the Pacific side of the country is highly vulnerable to climate variability. A particular threat in Panama is its vulnerability to the El Niño phenomenon, which leaves the country exposed to increased risks of drought and flooding and associated risks of losses to infrastructure, livelihoods, ecosystem degradation and an increase in vector-borne diseases. The efforts to respond to these multiple threats and disasters and to reduce the risks associated with disasters are therefore of crucial importance for the country.

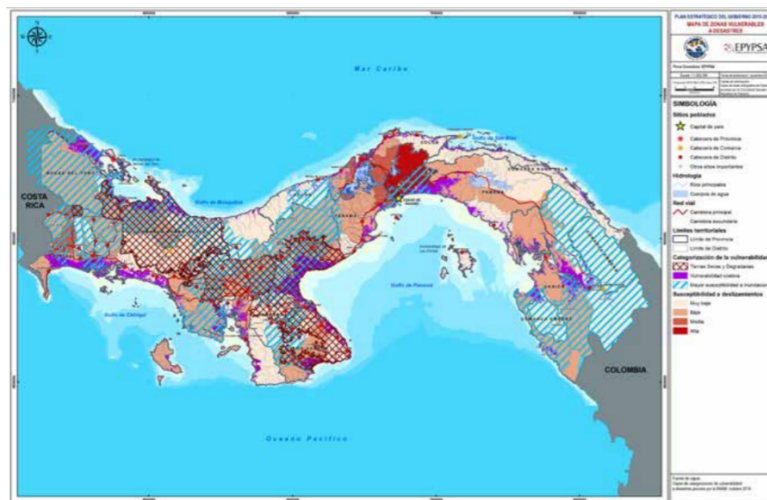


Fig. 1 Panama: Vulnerability and Hazards Map<sup>1</sup>.

As these threats and disasters have a different, and often greater impact on high risk populations such as children, adolescents and youth with disabilities, the Panamanian State has enacted policies with a differential approach to address the disaster risk situation and ensure inclusive education. However, institutional gaps have been identified in the implementation, monitoring and assessment of the application of these policies by first response agencies. In addition, there is a disconnect between guidelines at the national level and the capacities of local governments to implement these policies, especially for those related to children, adolescents and young people with disabilities. For example, barriers to communication and cultural coordination persist, which may hinder equal opportunities to participation, protection, care and recovery for young people with disabilities. In this manner, disasters and climate phenomena often impact the protective environments of children and youth with disabilities, and limit their access to health, food, water and education.

In recognition of this situation, RET's project aims to contribute to the institutionalization of an inclusive, multi-sectoral and community-based approach to disaster risk management and first response at the local level. The project strengthens the "National Integrated Disaster Risk Management Policy"<sup>2</sup>, the "Sustainable Strategy of the Ministry

<sup>1</sup> Government of the Republic of Panamá. (2014). Government Strategic Plan (2015-2018).

<sup>2</sup> Republic of Panama (2010). "National Integrated Disaster Risk Management Plan"

of Education of Panama for Disaster Risk Reduction Integrated with Environmental Education (2013-2020)"<sup>3</sup>, Law Num. 66<sup>4</sup> that decentralizes public administration, the "Local Government Pact for Risk Management and Sustainable Development"<sup>5</sup>, and the "2018-2019 National Operational Plan"<sup>6</sup> of the Panamanian Institute for Special Training (IPHE). Additionally, it contributes with the work areas number 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 13 y 16 of the "Regional Action Plan"<sup>7</sup> developed to support the implementation of the Sendai Framework<sup>8</sup>, which in turn supports the implementation of the Comprehensive School Safety Framework (CSSF) in the region.

RET works to generate a scalable and sustainable local model for integrated disaster risk management, using an inclusive, multisectoral and community-based approach that strengthens the capacities of the community and local governing institutions responsible for inclusive education and first response. This improves their management capacities and makes children, adolescents and young people with disabilities more resilient. To this end, the project addresses identified gaps for the protection and participation of this target group in integrated disaster risk management processes at their schools and communities.

The project is implemented in targeted districts, communities and schools by RET in close collaboration with the following government institutions: the National Civil Protection System (SINAPROC), the Ministry of Education (MEDUCA), the Panamanian Institute for Special Training (IPHE), and the National Association of Mayors (AMUPA), with participation from government institutions from the education, protection and first response sectors, along with young people with disabilities and their communities. The project is national in scope as it focuses on the institutional strengthening of IPHE, MEDUCA and AMUPA. Specifically, the project seeks to generate public policy tools relevant at local level, and a scalable intervention model. The piloting, validation and receiving feedback on methodologies, strategies, tools and plans covers the two provinces of Herrera and Los Santos.

### **Strengthening community awareness and mobilization capacity**

RET organizes technical meetings, workshops and thematic forums where experts from the areas of inclusive education, disabilities, health and the environment, as well as in first response, come together to exchange experiences and share their knowledge. These events aim to inform and raise awareness on DRR, inclusive education and disability and are aimed at public officials and community members at the national, local, school and community levels. A specific forum is dedicated to gender equality, disability, older people and DRR.

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<sup>3</sup> MEDUCA, "Sustainable Strategy of the Ministry of Education of Panama for Disaster Risk Reduction Integrated with Environmental Education (2013-2020)." MEDUCA, UNICEF, RET, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Law Num. 66 of October 29, 2015, which reforms Law 37 of 2009 and decentralizes public administration. The process to transfer skills and resources to local governments recently began on January 2, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> AMUPA, "Local Government Pact towards Risk Management and Sustainable Development." 2017.

<sup>6</sup> IPHE, "2018-2019 National Operational Plan." 2018. This plan is the result of an IPHE capacity strengthening process performed through the project, "Adolescents and youth with disabilities promote inclusive and safe educational environments to face the effects of ENSO phenomenon in Panama", which includes CDRM activities for the sustainability of strategies, plans and actions with an inclusive approach at all schools, extensions and IPHE programs at a national level.

<sup>7</sup> UNISDR, "Regional Action Plan for the Implementation of the 2015-2030 Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction in the Americas." Montreal, Canada, 2017, <http://eird.org/pr17/docs/plan-de-accion.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> UNISDR, "Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030." Sendai, Japan, 2015, [https://www.unisdr.org/files/43291\\_spanishsendaiframeworkfordisasterri.pdf](https://www.unisdr.org/files/43291_spanishsendaiframeworkfordisasterri.pdf). The Sendai Framework is the successor instrument to the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015: Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters. Sendai, Japan: [https://www.unisdr.org/files/43291\\_spanishsendaiframeworkfordisasterri.pdf](https://www.unisdr.org/files/43291_spanishsendaiframeworkfordisasterri.pdf)

Concretely, RET developed and provides a training on inclusive integrated disaster risk management (IDRM) and first responses through inclusive 'Ludic Pedagogical Learning Sessions', in which an equal number of female and male participants take part. In addition, an awareness-raising and information campaign is held that targets grassroots organizations, children, adolescents and youth with disabilities and their family members. The campaign has an emphasis on the protection of the most vulnerable and reaches caregivers, teachers, technicians, community leaders, merchants and community members where target schools are situated. Finally, a network of children, adolescents and youth with disabilities has been created and is being strengthened to promote integrated disaster risk management with an inclusive approach. The aim is to include them in IDRM actions, such as participate in the process to increase the resilience of their schools and communities.

These activities facilitate awareness-raising, mobilization and empowerment of government officials, children, adolescents and young people with disabilities, as well as the community in general. It also ensures the engagement of local governments in the integration of inclusive education measures within the concerned municipalities, communities and schools.



*Image 1. Training on Risks for Cognitively Disabled Youth*

### **Capacity-building to increase resilience for inclusive DRM**

The project's methodology is based on a participatory process with stakeholders at the national, municipal and school levels. Specifically, the project increases resilience amongst the mentioned actors through the strengthening of capacities in the areas of planning and response in the fields of education, disaster risk reduction and disability. As such, the capacities of the Panamanian Institute for Special Training (IPHE), as the lead agency for education for persons with disabilities in Panama, are being strengthened. This has allowed and continues to allow the IPHE, the education community and strategic partners to integrate risk management at the regional and local levels.

In the current project's stage RET implements several activities:

- a) Organization of committees and work teams in each of the three municipalities (in two provinces) in which the project takes place;
- b) Development and organization of in-person and virtual training in IDRM in inclusive schools for teachers, supervisors, and local public officials, as well as training on first response with an inclusive approach based on each type of disability;
- c) Provision of theoretical-practical training on community participation, with specific attention to gender equality, disability, older people and DRR;
- d) Training of public officials and community members on the use of the "Guide for Integrated Disaster Risk Management in Inclusive Schools" and the implementation of "Integrated and Inclusive Risk Management Plans at school and community levels", with a specific focus on gender equality;
- e) Organization and support to brigades in schools and communities with equal participation of both genders;
- f) Provision of signage of evacuation routes and safe zones;
- g) Organization, design and implementation of evacuation drills and simulations;
- h) Local adaptation and improvement of the 'Guide for Integrated Disaster Risk Management in Inclusive Schools' through a multi-sectoral, inclusive and community-based approach;
- i) Organization of follow-up meetings with key stakeholders to share progress made, lessons learned and best practices;
- j) Systematization and share of project's results.



*Image 2. Youth Evacuation Brigade*

### **Institutionalizing inclusive DRM in the education sector and increasing the resilience of the education sector**

Additionally, the project seeks to develop and strengthen methodologies, strategies and tools for integrated inclusive disaster risk management and first response in order to increase the resilience of the education sector in Panama, in accordance to the national policies of the country.

To achieve this, RET is also conducting the below activities:

- a) Development of integrated disaster risk management activities through the formulation and implementation of local plans;
- b) Strengthen the national IDRM Guide using an inclusive, multi-sectoral and community-based approach, and ensure it is being used;



- c) Development of three IDRM plans for inclusive schools with MEDUCA-IPHE;
- d) Development of a national M&E plan for IPHE's IDRM program, and ensure it is implemented;
- e) Design multi-threat risk maps;
- f) Development and share results, lessons learned and best practices with key stakeholders.

### **Some concrete outputs of the project**

The implementation of all of the above-mentioned activities has resulted in a number of tools and documents that have been developed and published over the years. One of these is the "*Ludic Pedagogical Learning Methodology and its training sessions*" to inform, raise awareness and empower children and youth on DRR. This methodology has been recognized by the Organization of American States as a valuable tool in the DRR sector. Other tools that have been developed are the "*Guide for Integrated Disaster Risk Management in Inclusive Education Centers*", "*Guideline Notes with recommendations for the community, teachers and parents/caregivers to support adolescents with disabilities during emergency situations*", "*Guideline Notes on El Niño, floods, fires and their effects on people with and without disabilities*", and a "*Manual on sign language focuses on DRR &M vocabulary*". Finally, a *virtual course* was developed on DRR and inclusion of people with disabilities. Many of the DRR tools developed by RET in Panama are available on the following website:

<http://educacioninclusivayreducciondelriesgo-panama.org/>

it is worth saying that at the time of this paper's presentation at the 7<sup>th</sup> ICSD event, we will introduce additional qualitative and quantitative project's outputs and outcomes.

### **Initial concluding remarks**

Through community awareness and mobilization efforts, capacity-building and institutionalizing IDRM in the education sector, RET has made significant progress in terms of including children, adolescents and youth with disabilities in DRM in Panama. In cooperation with the national authorities and the extended educational community, inclusive school security plans were designed and subsequently expanded to all IPHE centers and schools around the country. As a result of the intervention, all centers have integrated a comprehensive inclusive risk management plan into their operational plans, which oblige authorities to commit a budget and staffing for their implementation. The intervention also contributed to ensuring compliance with relevant national legislation and strategies relating to DRR.

Several elements proven to be fundamental in this approach: firstly, all tools, risk analysis processes, mitigation measures and planning of activities were elaborated with the direct participation of young people with disabilities, their caregivers and teachers. Secondly, an analysis was done of all processes to be carried out, using the equal opportunities perspective. This led RET to develop the first ever "sign language" for people with hearing impairment in Panama dedicated to risk management and first response. Finally, RET implemented mitigation measures through the provision of adequate equipment and facilities with a focus on inclusiveness and the elimination of physical barriers. This included the development of different forms of signboards and other supports for different types of disabilities. All these measures increase the security conditions of targeted schools in Panama.

With this project, for the first time in Panama a differential approach for people with disabilities in integrated disaster risk management was incorporated successfully. The practice targets children, adolescents and youth with disabilities, a cohort whose specific needs and capacities were not addressed by the policies that were developed so far. The approach successfully overcomes barriers that this group faces, such as barriers in communication that hinder participation, protection, care and recovery. The young people actively participated and continue participating in the project and are recognized as important actors and agents of change in their communities regarding disaster risk management in daily life, and not just as passive recipients of assistance.

In the current project's phase, RET is aiming to involve all local governments in order to achieve a complete institutionalization cycle at all levels within the public administration, which will ensure the long-term sustainability of the intervention. Therefore, RET continues advocating and working for the inclusion of children, adolescents and youth with disabilities in disaster risk management and hereby ensuring that no one is left behind.



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