



REDUCING DISASTER RISK
AND FACILITATING
EXTERNAL ASSISTANCE

in Belize



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REDUCING DISASTER RISK AND FACILITATING EXTERNAL ASSISTANCE IN BELIZE

1. Summary

In late 2024, the [United Nations General Assembly](#) agreed to elaborate and conclude a legally binding instrument on the protection of persons in the event of disasters (PPED) based on the International Law Commission's (ILC) [Draft Articles on the protection of persons in the event of disasters](#) by the end of 2027. The decision to elaborate a treaty on this topic underscores a concrete commitment by States to enhance the protection of disaster-affected persons. This case study explores how a treaty on the PPED could support disaster risk reduction (DRR) and the facilitation of external assistance in Belize. It has been developed in support of IFRC's [proposals on strengthening the Draft Articles](#), developed for the consideration of States ahead of the upcoming PPED treaty negotiations.

Belize is a coastal nation in Central America that sits in the path of most storms in the Atlantic.¹ Due to the increasing impacts

of climate change, urbanisation, and land usage, the country is particularly vulnerable to severe flooding.²

Belize has taken steps to enhance disaster risk management (DRM), including through leveraging available resources and partnerships, such as strengthening relationships with regional bodies like the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA) through its Regional Response Mechanism, and the Coordination Center for the Prevention of Natural Disasters in Central America (CEPRENAC) through its coordination mechanism known as the Central American Mechanism of Mutual Aid Before Disasters (MecReg). Additionally, Belize participates in the International Disaster Response Law (IDRL) Working Group and has strengthened legal and policy arrangements for DRM, such as developing the Disaster Preparedness and Response Act (DPRA) and the Foreign Assistance Response Plan (FARP), to strengthen partnerships and coordination.

Nevertheless, the most recent tropical storms, Sara (2024) and Lisa (2024), as well as recurring floods in certain geographical areas such as the Belize River Valley, provide evidence of the challenges involved in responding to disasters, in particular with respect to assessing damage and coordination between stakeholders, highlighting the need to further enhance disaster preparedness.

This case study explores how a treaty on the PPED could support Belize in the management of disasters and disaster risks, in particular through strengthening preparedness and response, DRM, coordination and the facilitation of external disaster assistance.

“ This Treaty can serve as a catalyst for Governments to meaningfully prioritize an all-of-society approach to DRR across all sectors and levels of governance, not just within specialized DRM Ministries. We need to think about the DRM system as cross-cutting and cross-sectoral and come together to implement the system effectively to avoid exhausting limited resources. ”

Daniel Mendez, Coordinator, Belize NEMO

15,000 people affected by Hurricane Lisa (2022)
BZ\$130 million in damages, including **BZ\$54.4 million** in housing losses
120,000 people displaced regionally during Tropical Storm Sara (2024)
Belize population: ~420,000 → impacts affect a significant share of the population

2. Background

Located in Central America, Belize is an ethnically and linguistically diverse country with a population of almost 420,000 people.³ Due to its geographic location on the Atlantic coast, Belize is prone to natural disasters, as it sits on the direct path of most storms in the region and is prone to severe flooding.⁴

Belize City, the country's largest city, is particularly vulnerable to storm surges and floods due to its location on the coastline, which also contributes to a concentration of both population and infrastructure in the city.⁵ When disasters strike, families can lose not only their homes but also access to clean water, health services, and livelihoods. The cumulative effect of repeated disasters places a heavy burden on communities, erodes resilience, and can leave many people trapped in cycles of vulnerability. As disasters become more frequent and intense, they are becoming more costly for the people of Belize.⁶

In recent years, the country has experienced several disasters.⁷ In 2022, Hurricane Lisa caused widespread destruction in Belize District and the Cayes, affecting nearly 15,000 people and causing damages of more than BZ\$130 million.⁸ Total damage in the housing sector was estimated at BZ\$54.4 million, and many families were left without safe shelter for months. In 2024,

Tropical Storm Sara triggered catastrophic flooding in the Belize River Valley, submerging sugarcane fields, damaging critical roads and bridges, and leaving communities cut off.⁹ The flooding, intensified by climate change, urbanisation, and land usage, was part of a regional disaster that displaced more than 120,000 people across Central America.

Belize has developed strong disaster management institutions, led by the National Emergency Management Organization (NEMO),¹⁰ and grounded in the Belize Disaster Preparedness and Response Act of 2000 (DPR Act).¹¹ District and Village Emergency Management Organizations extend preparedness and coordination to the local level.¹² Belize also developed a Foreign Assistance Response Plan (FARP) in 2025, which defines specific roles and responsibilities for international disaster relief supporting actors.¹³ Through this plan, the Government aims to support preparedness and response activities by streamlining relief coordination, and to set standards and requirements relating to international goods.¹⁴

At the regional level, Belize is an active member of the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA) and participates in the Central American Mechanism of Mutual Aid Before Disasters (MecReg). These bodies provide important

The auxiliary role of the Belize Red Cross Society

As auxiliary to its public authorities in the humanitarian field, the Belize Red Cross Society is a key actor in supporting the government's humanitarian interventions and has been legally recognised in Belize since August 1983. The Belize Red Cross Society supports DRM in Belize in the following ways:

- 1) Supporting communities with disaster response, including emergency medical care and relief supplies;
- 2) Supporting community resilience-building, with initiatives for health, water, sanitation, and food security;
- 3) Disseminating early warning messages for disasters;
- 4) Providing vulnerable populations with social welfare services, aiding persons with disabilities, and supporting families impacted by fires and other emergencies.



“ The DRR article in the PPED Treaty is essential to retain and strengthen in the treaty, because in many ways, risk reduction and preparedness are part of disaster response. ”

*Rhea Marie Pierre,
IFRC Operations Coordinator*

frameworks for collaboration and solidarity among neighbouring States.¹⁵ A future global treaty on the PPED could complement and reinforce these regional mechanisms, helping to align domestic, regional, and international legal frameworks and providing greater clarity and consistency on roles and responsibilities, and coordination mechanisms, for actions to be taken to reduce disaster risks and to prepare for and respond to disasters.

Belize's recent experiences show both the strengths and the limits of its current system. Regional and national frameworks provide important tools, but gaps remain – particularly in ensuring that DRR is fully integrated into all sectors and that cooperation with international partners is clear and efficient. A global treaty on the PPED can help close these gaps, ensuring that the people of Belize receive the protection and support they need when facing increasingly severe and frequent disasters.

3. How the PPED treaty can strengthen DRM in Belize

As outlined above, Belize has taken important steps to build a strong foundation for DRM, including through national legislation such as the Disaster Preparedness and Response Act and the Foreign Assistance Plan, as well as institutions like the National Emergency Management Organization (NEMO).¹⁶ Yet recurring hurricanes, floods and wild fires, have shown that additional action is needed by the Government of Belize and its partners to reduce risks, strengthen preparedness, and protect vulnerable populations from the growing increase in disaster risks.¹⁷

The proposed PPED treaty could support Belize's efforts in three key ways. First, it could establish a binding obligation for all governments to take concrete steps to reduce disaster risks.¹⁸ For Belize, this could mean stronger legal frameworks for land use planning to curb deforestation, investment in resilient housing and infrastructure, and expanded early warning systems in flood-prone areas. It could also encourage measures such as contingency planning, training and drills, natural resources management, and the use of nature-based solutions to protect communities. These commitments would help ensure that DRR is consistently prioritised, both nationally and regionally, and that Belize is supported by evolving best practices from across the globe.

Belize's Disaster Management Architecture and the Role of the PPED Treaty

National level:

National Emergency Management Organization (NEMO)

Disaster Preparedness and Response Act (DPRA)

Foreign Assistance Response Plan (FARP)

Regional partnerships:

CDEMA Regional Response Mechanism

CEPREDENAC / MecReg

How a PPED treaty would enhance coordination:

Binding DRR obligations

Streamlined external assistance (e.g., customs fast-track, quality standards)

Alignment of domestic, regional, and global frameworks

Second, a global treaty on the PPED would reinforce regional and global cooperation.¹⁹ As mentioned above, Belize is a member of the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA) and cooperates with the Mechanism of Mutual Aid Before Disasters (MecReg). These bodies are vital for sharing resources and expertise in a region where disasters often cross borders. Importantly, many regional mechanisms address the support provided by Member States of the region but do not regulate the support provided by other assisting actors. A global treaty could address this gap and complement these efforts by aligning

“ Today, there are challenges where it is not that facilities don't exist, but there is a lack of awareness of the law itself. Insufficient understanding leads to confusion. A treaty on the protection of persons in disasters can initiate discussions on our existing DRM laws and policies, raising awareness and understanding about existing roles and responsibilities.

A treaty can also support us in identifying strengths and gaps in our existing systems, as well as find solutions to continually strengthen these systems, including through the enhanced cooperation of local and external actors. ”

*Lily Bowman,
Director General, Belize Red Cross Society*

domestic and regional frameworks with universal standards, ensuring that cooperation is predictable, effective, and focused on protecting people.

Third, while Belize does not usually depend heavily on external assistance, past operations have revealed challenges when external aid is needed. For example, after Hurricane Lisa in 2022 and Tropical Storm Sara in 2024, relief operations faced bottlenecks at entry points. Customs delays slowed the arrival of food, medicine, and shelter materials, while some unsolicited donations created confusion and strained local logistics. In practice, this meant that families in shelters waited longer for essential supplies, and emergency responders had to divert time and resources to sorting and clearing inappropriate goods instead of focusing on life-saving assistance.

These challenges illustrate why clearer legal frameworks are necessary. At present, Belize has mechanisms such as its foreign assistance plan, but procedures for customs clearance, tax exemptions, and quality control are not always streamlined. Despite significant steps taken by Belize to facilitate and reduce national and administrative processes for external assistance,

other assisting actors sometimes encounter uncertainty and delays, which can make it more difficult to ensure timely and effective assistance to affected communities.

The PPED treaty could help address these problems by setting out common rules for how external assistance should be requested, accepted, and facilitated.²⁰ This includes ensuring fast-track customs and tax exemptions, defining quality standards for relief items, and clarifying roles and responsibilities of domestic and international actors. By reducing confusion and delays, such measures would help ensure that when the next disaster strikes, assistance reaches the people who need it most – quickly, safely, and with respect for their dignity.

Taken together, Belize's legal and operational progress shows commitment and leadership, but it also underscores the limits of working in isolation. As disasters increase in scale and frequency across Central America and the Caribbean, no country can face these risks alone. A global treaty could strengthen Belize's domestic laws, reinforce its regional commitments, and ensure that international cooperation is reliable, efficient, and truly centred on protecting people. ●

NOTES

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