



**Presentation made by Hon. Marlon A. Penn  
Minister for Health And Social Development  
Government of the Virgin Islands**

**Panel 3. Ensuring enabling and supportive environments: physical, social and cultural environments that enhance the exercise of rights**

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*Thank you, [Moderator]*

*A pleasant Good Afternoon to everyone*

I would **first** like to thank ECLAC for the opportunity to participate in this important discussion and **share the Virgin Islands' perspective** on the topic: Protection of the **human rights** of older persons in situations of social and environmental disasters.

Vulnerability is the human dimension of disasters – and many older people are especially vulnerable because of decreased mobility, chronic health conditions, or lack of social support. This makes it harder for them to maintain their homes, prepare for a potential disaster, receive and act on early warnings, and evacuate or otherwise protect themselves.

The Caribbean has the fastest-**ageing** population in the **developing** world - according to the Pan American Health Organisation. Population ageing combined with climate change and a **growing number and intensity of disasters** creates special challenges for our region.

On September 6, 2017 Hurricane Irma hit the Virgin Islands. Mini tornadoes formed inside the cyclone and gusts in excess of 220 mph were measured. This crisis happened just one month after the Territory had experienced extensive flood damage, and two weeks before being struck by another category 5 hurricane - Maria.

The lives and well-being of older people were **severely affected** by the widespread devastation, especially those who were **displaced from their homes**.

**Disruptions to healthcare and social services, transportation and communication, utilities, and food supply** – along with the **psychological** impacts – were also far-reaching and long lasting.

Although only four (4) persons died during the passage of Hurricane Irma, it was not surprising that we recorded a spike in the number of deaths in the following months, mainly among older persons.

Protecting the elderly was therefore central to the Government's response in areas such as social protection, housing, health and nutrition, and psycho-social support.

Following a door-to-door Rapid Assessment, expansion of emergency sheltering, and the distribution of food and relief supplies, attention rapidly shifted to the disaster recovery phase.

In conducting social assessments and enrolling beneficiaries, **the presence of older persons** increased the vulnerability score, and **level of priority** given to eligible households that received 3-month cash grants, and housing assistance.

### *Social Assistance*

A Financial Assistance Programme was delivered jointly with the BVI Red Cross and the Social Development Department, using a shared beneficiary list and a Joint Cash Platform. The Programme directly served 3,274 individuals, including 389 older adults.

### *Housing*

In the aftermath of the 2017 disasters, nearly 50% of the country's residential buildings suffered major damages or were destroyed. Replenishing the housing stock was therefore central to the Territory's continued recovery.

Through its Housing Recovery Assistance Programme, eligible households were given grants or soft loans to repair damaged homes or construct new ones. Out of 649 applicants, 357 (or 55%) were aged 60 or older.

### *Health and Social Care*

**Interruptions to healthcare services** and access to medications especially affected older persons. This was mainly due to the physical damage to several community clinics, as well as disruptions to transportation and utility services that limited the movement of health workers and medical supplies to our Sister Islands.

In response, the BVI Health Services Authority rapidly re-organised its **primary care** services. **Makeshift clinics** were set up, and the **home visiting programme** was expanded. More recently, a modular field hospital was acquired to increase the capacity of the health system to respond to future disasters on multiple islands.

Additionally, an initiative called: *Strengthening Mental Health and Psycho-social Support in Disaster Management and Building Individual and Community Resilience* was implemented, which has trained more than 200 persons throughout the Territory. The Project was later extended in response to COVID-19.

The disasters also affected older persons in residential care settings. The Government's two homes for the elderly suffered extensive damage during the storms. Along with rapid repairs, both facilities were expanded and upgraded to increase resilience to future disasters. Several Community Centres and churches were also severely damaged, or used to house displaced persons over an extended period. As a result, recreational day programmes that provided leisure and social inclusion activities for older persons remained closed for an extended period. Even as Community Centres were being repaired, seniors' recreational programmes were further affected by the COVID-19 social distancing safety measures.

The Social Development Department maintains a **disaster risk register** of older persons. This tool helps in assessing and understanding their needs, building resilience, and providing assistance when needed.

### *Lessons Learned*

It is imperative that countries find ways to support older persons' resilience, preparedness, and recovery from disasters. This approach needs to be built into government-led Comprehensive Disaster Management strategies, underpinned by a shock-responsive social protection system.

Government and its social partners need to work together to:

1. Strengthen institutional capacities to mainstream and respond to the needs of older persons in emergency or disaster situations.
2. Support representation of older persons on disaster management teams at the community level;
3. Encourage NGOs to assist with safeguarding the well-being (including evacuation) of older people in times of disaster;
4. Minimize disruption to health and social services on which older people rely;
5. Design shelters that are accessible for older persons;
6. Create contact systems that enable checks on the well-being of older adults;
7. Use community mapping data to identify areas where many older adults live;
8. Bolster social support across individuals, families, and communities at large; and
9. Provide financial resources for older adults who do not have the funds to manage pre- and post-disaster expenses.

### *Looking Ahead*

The Virgin Islands' response to the disasters of 2017 has shown what can be delivered to meet the needs of older people if social protection is **properly resourced**, and when **a range of actors work together**. The Government of the Virgin Islands has therefore renewed its commitment to support strengthened disaster risk management and social protection systems – including through enhanced arrangements for **disaster risk financing**.

Ensuring that resources are channelled towards developing an age-friendly approach to Disaster Risk Reduction will help mitigate economic, health, and other insecurities for older persons in the future.

Thank you.