

Conference Report: Climate Change and Vulnerable Populations: Case Studies in Urban Policy and Public Health Adaptation

In addressing emerging issue in climate change adaptation in Latin America and the Caribbean, the Wilson Center's Brazil Institute and Environmental Change and Security Program in partnership with the United State Agency for International Development (USAID) has accomplished three successful seminars since the beginning of calendar year 2013. Working in close partnership with USAID Missions in the region, seminars have highlighted country specific issues related to climate change adaptation while bringing together the public, private and academic communities.

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On Friday September 27th, the Wilson Center's Brazil Institute, in association with the United States Agency for International Development – Dominican Republic mission, hosted a seminar and workshop on “*Climate Change and Vulnerable Populations: Case Studies in Urban Policy and Public Health Adaptation*” which featured speakers from the United States, Mexico and the Dominican Republic.

The third installment of an ongoing series to focus on climate change adaptation issues in Latin America and the Caribbean, the objective for the Dominican Republic was to use the general theme of vulnerable populations and disseminate specific topics and issues involving reproductive health, family planning, water mitigation and urban planning. While climate issues within the Dominican Republic are extensive and complex and with political sensitivities involving family planning and migration, an effort was made to make sure that such issues would be addressed proactively. In building the agenda, the larger theme of vulnerable populations related to climate change issues kept reappearing. This therefore became the basis and direction in which the seminar would follow.

Responding to the need for a better understanding of the correlation between climate change and vulnerable populations within the Dominican Republic, speakers, who came

from diverse backgrounds, were asked to bridge the gap between adaptation strategies and the how they can be related and eventually implemented to current situations. With the *Consejo Nacional Para el Cambio Climatico* opening the seminar, an agency dedicated to the promotion of and encouragement within the Dominican political and social societies to work together for comprehensive strategies provided a level of legitimacy in which the backing of the government-run agency to address climate change was represented. While the Council has been tasked to promote adaptation strategies, it has been slow to bring cohesion and mainstream the different ministries tasked with climate change issues, but has shown promise to promote such strategies.

Turning to the issues of family planning and reproductive health and its correlation to vulnerable populations, Kathleen Mogelgaard, a long time consultant for the Wilson Center's Environmental Change and Security Program was given the task of running a two and a half hour workshop to address such issues. The objective set by Kathleen was outlined in the following five goals:

1. The ability to understand how population dynamics relate to climate change vulnerability and adaptive capacity
2. How access to reproductive health contributes to women's social and life empowerment and how they strengthen resilience and capacity
3. Familiarization of data sources
4. Been able to discuss examples of population dynamics and adaptive capacity in the Dominican Republic
5. Ability to extend individual networks

The workshop was by no means a simple undertaking in that the correlation between climate change and reproductive health, primarily in that increased accessibility and extended agency allows for increased resilience and individual capacity, needed to be made. By opening the series with specific data on the Dominican Republic, allowed for

the audience, who came from a plethora of government agencies and ministries, NGOs and academia, were faced with the reality of what the island nation was facing. The increased urbanization, in which 76 percent of the population will live in cities by 2025 and an aging population where 17 percent of the population will be 65 and older by midcentury, demonstrated the burgeoning need for comprehensive strategies and the strain on current capacities and infrastructure to handle the growing needs of the country.

While moving away from specifics of the Dominican Republic, a focus on identifying and defining population dynamics and reproductive health gave the audience a better understanding of how specific vulnerable populations, in this case women and those moving to urban settings face greater risk in terms of accessibility. Kathleen demonstrated that the relationship between fertility, reproductive health, and adaptive capacity can be demonstrated through an examination of women's experience to climate change and specifically how the family construct disproportionality affects women and their ability to adapt to climate risks. Furthermore poor maternal/child health, high fertility rates, and short birth intervals coupled with early childhood departure from school and limited access to income are limitations for an individual's adaptive capacity. By being able to create sound adaptive strategies and community based adaptation leads to increased agency would curtail the risk associated to such vulnerable populations.

Groups were then chosen at random, four in total, and were given the task of identifying and were assigned and asked to specify links and challenges using their own personal backgrounds on population growth, urbanization, migration, and women's empowerment/reproductive health. The goal was to use what was taught in the preceding lecture and adapt the Dominican Republic's issues and produce strategies. The small group activities was also an attempt to bring individuals who work in related fields, but who in reality rarely if ever work together to produce effective outcomes. Ministerial employees worked alongside leaders of social empowerment NGOs to solve local issues in a mock government and how adaptation strategies could be implemented.

The afternoon speakers, who gave specific case studies about the cities of Santiago (north of Santo Domingo) and of Mexico City reemphasized the links between accessibility and climate risk. The two Santiago cases, focusing on water mitigation and access and urban redevelopment, demonstrated how specifically in the Dominican Republic there is movement to increase the understanding of climate change issued catastrophes and how they affect vulnerable populations, but specific adaptation strategies were clearly missing and were barely in their infancy and lacked implementation. The case studies in Santiago, CEUR and FUNDOGER, specified how their organizations have worked with local programs, such as the national brewery, to promote water management programs.

The case of Mexico City helped to highlight the relationship between capacity and implementation of urban planning projects and the difficulties governments and NGOs face to develop strategies for such projects. The Mexican case study, presented by Dr. Fernando Aragon, a chapter author in the recently released IPCC 5th Assessment, was important because it provided the audience with an outside perspective and how one of the largest Latin American cities has reacted to climate change and how the issues can be addressed.

A week prior to the seminar taking place, the confirmed list of attendees were sent a one page questionnaire that asked them about their specific experiences and training, what topics interest them the most, and biggest challenges pertaining to climate change adaptation issues. The poll suggested that the majority of the participants had a mid to high level understanding of climate change adaptation issues. When asked what areas and themes they would like to focus on, the participants overwhelmingly chose adaptation processes and strategies. When participants were asked to identify specific challenges to the Dominican Republic and the region, a common theme reappeared; all agreed that a comprehensive strategy for climate change adaptation was needed in order to protect the future and educate the population. A sense of urgency, resonating to the entire Caribbean as a whole is apparent:

In the Caribbean region, in particular the small developing island states, face specific challenges associated to climate change such as their isolated island nature (and access to natural resources), size of their national territories of which a majority of the population live along the coast, the lack of economic diversity and dependence on tourism.

The idea that climate change strategies have taken a back seat in government planning has been a recurring topic during the course of implementation of these seminars. A correlation between urgency for governments to react and minimal capacity has led to slow implementation of existing projects and little understanding and spending on future programs. The need for economic diversity was also present in Barbados, where the drive to cater to foreign tourists has jeopardized water management and speeded coral reef disintegration. Much like in Colombia, specifically the urban coastal areas susceptible to erosion, water management in Barbados and resilience measures in the Dominican Republic all share a common link – the lack of efficient and cohesive public strategy for climate change adaptation.

Upon the conclusion of the seminar, participants were sent a post-seminar questionnaire that asked them to rate the conference on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being terrible and 10 being the greatest) and the median was an 8, in which participants appreciated the diversity of the group and the quality of the presentations, specifically the strength of the reproductive health workshop and its small group activities, and the example of Mexico City.

When asked how the seminar could be improved, participants asked to include projects that have had local success and can provide the analysis and solutions, with a weakness being of not identifying specific solutions to the problems addressed during the seminar.

The seminar was effective in reaching its outlined goals of doing what the Wilson Center does best, creating a positive neutral space to discuss issues openly and without prejudice or bias towards specific subsets of ideologies or agendas. The participants realized this and embraced the speakers and group exercises. Upon its conclusion, the direct advisory to the mayor of Santo Domingo praised how such a successful event was able to bring such a diverse group of individuals while peaking their interest on the subject and retaining their attention throughout the course of the day. While successfully planting seeds within the country, adaptation strategies are far and few between but nevertheless a topic of great interest and desire with the people who are looking towards the future.