



Human Mobility in the Context of Climate Change

Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Eastern Caribbean

POLICY BRIEF – Executive Summary

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 **Organisation of
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Executive Summary

Protocol Member States of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) enjoy freedom of movement of citizens, by virtue of the Revised Treaty of Basseterre (RTB) and its policy on contingent rights. In March 2020, months before the official June commencement of the annual hurricane season, the OECS region, like the rest of the world, began experiencing the impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak. Having been declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization in March 2020, COVID-19 has caused, and continues to inflict, significant economic contraction in the OECS Member States (MS), including temporary but often extended, closure of borders. With support from the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), through its Global Programme “Human Mobility in the Context of Climate Change” (GP HMCCC), the OECS Commission sought to explore the implications for human mobility in the event of a hurricane impacting MS during the COVID-19 pandemic. This policy brief seeks to better understand the nexus between COVID-19, climate change/hurricane season and human mobility in the OECS region.

The Eastern Caribbean region is currently faced with a dilemma: On the one hand, the region is struggling with the management of the COVID-19 pandemic which has necessitated extended State of Emergency periods with established curfews and other measures to encourage people to stay home, practice social distancing and move as little as possible. Also, borders are largely closed, hence,

the Free Movement of People Regime in the OECS region is restricted due to COVID-19. These situations imply that people cannot move within the region and internal movements are also restricted. On the other hand, the OECS region was expecting an above-average active hurricane season which, based on past experience, might require people to move within their countries or across borders as a result of hurricanes or other climate-related events. These two different crises demand contrasting kinds of action: remaining versus moving. This creates a challenge which shall be discussed in this policy brief. Furthermore, possible opportunities which occur due to this particular situation are taken into account.

Through primary (survey and semi-structured interviews) and secondary (literature review) data collection, evidence was gathered to inform this policy brief. Responses were received from climate change, social and human services, immigration and disaster management professionals from eight (8) OECS MS, namely, Saint Lucia, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Antigua and Barbuda, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Grenada, Montserrat, Commonwealth of Dominica and Anguilla. In addition, seven expert interviews were conducted.

The findings showed that COVID-19's significant adverse impact on the economies of OECS MS originated firstly with the main economic sector – tourism. This resulted in a chain of effects across other economic sectors. Consequently, widespread unemployment, eventually led to the need

for economic and social stabilization measures. This necessitated governments seeking extra budgetary support from development partners such as the World Bank, the Caribbean Development Bank, and the Eastern Caribbean Central Bank. Private sector entities in the OECS MS also demonstrated corporate social responsibility by providing support in various ways, including resources to purchase critical supplies, provision of meals, grants, and payment breaks for utilities.

As COVID-19 continued its spread, social, legislative and security measures were taken to reduce the importation of cases and contain community spread. Measures included border closures, declaration of states of emergency, curfews, limitations on mass gathering, early closure of schools and transitioning to online learning, legislating health protocols such as the requirement to wear masks and improved hygiene practices. Development partners also provided psycho-social support through various programmes.

Both internal and cross-border migration within OECS MS has been managed at a personal and at a governmental level, as a result of the provisions of the RTB. This was demonstrated in a significant way after the passage of Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017 which resulted in many persons being displaced. The regional mechanism through the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA) allows for the support to disaster displaced persons, once activated by OECS MS National Emergency Coordinating Offices. Despite the strengths of the regional mechanism, some weaknesses have been identified, such as a lack of human resources, specifically leadership capacity; insufficient financial resources and a lack of political will to approach disaster management in a 'non-episodic' manner.

COVID-19 and hurricane convergence poses many complications, mainly due to the varied and partly contradicting responses that these two events require. COVID-19 requires social distancing, while hurricanes often result in mass gathering in shelters. The need for high com-

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pliance with hygiene practices can be thwarted in the aftermath of a hurricane with adverse impacts on water infrastructure, resulting in quick depletion of stored water and water rationing. Movement within countries and across borders has been curtailed with COVID-19 but a hurricane can result in displacement, causing the need to flee either internally or across borders. COVID-19 requires a well-functioning healthcare system to preserve lives and functioning telecommunication systems, while a hurricane can damage or destroy all infrastructure.

In responding to the above, OECS MS must embrace a coordinated approach and proper planning across all sectors and at all levels in seeking to make allowances for human mobility issues which may arise in the event of a hurricane occurring during the COVID-19 pandemic or similar future incident. A total of twenty (20) recommendations have been identified in the recommendations table below to assist with a coordinated approach. These need to be addressed in the short, medium and long term. The supporting sources, whether based on the survey, interviews or literature review are also identified. Two key recommendations are "to develop national and/or sub-regional financial mechanisms for supporting displaced persons and cross-border migrants from the adverse impacts of climate change" and "to sensitize vulnerable populations and communities on the options for risk pooling and securing livelihood protection policies".

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