



Bracing for Storm Season in the Era of COVID-19

As COVID-19 ravages the world’s health systems, another threat is looming: hurricane season.

By Emma Schwartz

Health systems around the world are in the middle of the fight against COVID-19, but there’s another threat right around the corner. June 1 marks the start of hurricane season — and this year’s forecast is expected to be more active than usual.

The upcoming season will ravage communities already overstretched in the ongoing battle against the coronavirus. The pandemic will complicate preparedness and response efforts, as first responders must simultaneously take measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. It already has: The tornadoes and storms that tore across the southeastern U.S. in April exposed a new level of challenges for survivors and first responders, who were forced to work around the threat of the coronavirus as they dealt with the aftermath of the disaster — what could be a grim foreshadowing of the months to come.

How do we effectively prepare and respond when disaster hits, when every country on earth is already facing an unprecedented crisis?



'An Enormous Vulnerability'

A disaster the scale of Hurricane Dorian will be devastating wherever it hits. But a disaster compounded by the pandemic will have catastrophic consequences. And the most disaster-prone countries are also among the most vulnerable to COVID-19.

"Both responses will suffer," says Tom Cotter, Project HOPE's director of emergency response. "The response to the pandemic will suffer, and so will the response to the disaster."

International travel restrictions will make it harder to send relief in the first critical hours after disaster strikes — not just response teams and medical volunteers, but cargo flights carrying medicine and medical supplies. On the ground, mass evacuations may be hindered. Shelters may have to take fewer people in order to comply with social distancing rules. And survivors may not be able to travel or cross borders to find refuge.

"Normally what happens is we send resources from places that aren't experiencing disaster to places that are experiencing disaster, and there's no place right now that isn't experiencing disaster," Cotter says. "So it's going to be really difficult to get that movement of resources to where it's needed."

"It doesn't matter where you look in the world right now — no one is prepared for a disaster. Our hospitals are full everywhere. Our emergency management agencies are completely engaged with the pandemic. There's no place that is ready for hurricane season. We're facing an enormous vulnerability that we haven't faced before."

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Colombia's health care system is already overstretched by the influx of people fleeing the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela. A fast-spreading pandemic like COVID-19 could be devastating. Photo by Charlie Cordero for Project HOPE, 2019.

A New Approach to Emergency Response

Project HOPE has a long history of responding to the world's most urgent natural disasters and humanitarian crises, from Hurricane Dorian in the Bahamas to the COVID-19 pandemic. After Hurricane Dorian devastated the island of Abaco, HOPE distributed more than 16,000 hygiene kits, \$3.1 million in medicines and supplies, and 3 metric tons of supplies to the Bahamas' Ministry of Health.

But what happens when we can't deploy a response team or deliver essential supplies?

The answer lies in building local capacity — in empowering local health workers with the training and tools they need to save lives with or without outside help. This has always been an essential component of our approach: After providing immediate relief, our team stays on the ground to help local health systems build back stronger and prepare to face the next disaster. We build capacity wherever we have a footprint.

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Now, the importance of that work is clearer than ever.

“The people on the scene are the people who are going to be responding to the disaster,” Cotter says. “That may be communities, that may be local health systems, that may be our country offices. As a global community, we need to be empowering and enabling and building capacity where the disasters hit.”

Over the past year, HOPE has taken steps to regionalize its response — equipping countries with the internal expertise and support they will need to respond when disaster hits.

So what does that look like?

In Indonesia, thanks to support from Medtronic, Project HOPE just launched its first regional response hub. In the short-term, a regional emergency response manager based in Jakarta will work to expand our COVID-19 response across the region. In the future, the hub will strengthen our emergency response programming and build a roster of regionally based volunteers ready to respond when the next tsunami, typhoon, or cyclone strikes.

HOPE is planning to launch hubs in every region where we work, spanning the globe. Because when disaster strikes, affected communities shouldn't have to wait for help to arrive.

“Indonesia is one of the most vulnerable and disaster-prone countries in the world, so having a base there is no accident,” Cotter says. “Now we're quicker to the draw, and we're quicker on the scene to any disaster that happens.”

Reaching the Most Vulnerable

In the Bahamas, reminders of last hurricane season are still visible on Abaco Island. Broken boats lie stranded in the middle of the streets. Many neighborhoods still run on generators, with no electricity or running water. Pregnant women must travel to Nassau for prenatal care, and most primary care centers on the island are still out of operation.

More than eight months after the Category 5 storm struck, Bahamians still struggling to recover from Hurricane Dorian must now prepare for the possibility that it could all happen again — while fighting the dual threat of a deadly pandemic.

“The level of devastation in the Bahamas was so high that even in normal circumstances it was going to take at least a few years to fully recover,” says Dr. Vlatko Uzevski, Project HOPE’s regional manager of the Balkans and a team lead in HOPE’s Bahamas response.

But it’s not just infrastructure that’s lacking, Uzevski says — there’s also a country-wide shortage of health workers. Even before the storm, the islands hit by Dorian were struggling to meet the needs of the population. Every community on earth is feeling the impact of COVID-19, but some, like on Abaco, face a greater risk than others: places where health systems were already underequipped and overwhelmed.



Hurricane Dorian caused catastrophic damage on Abaco and Grand Bahama Island in September 2019, making history as one of the strongest Atlantic hurricanes ever recorded. Photo by James Buck for Project HOPE, 2019.

So what if the Bahamas faces its next natural disaster during the pandemic?

"The government is doing all possible to better prepare for the new hurricane season, but facing the COVID-19 pandemic at the same time has made things even more difficult," says Emilija Dukovski, another team lead in HOPE's Bahamas response. "The majority of the organizations that were working on Abaco Island to help restore the health system and prepare for the next season have stopped all their activities. I don't believe that the island would survive another disaster like Dorian."

Building local capacity will be key to weathering future storms, and HOPE is moving quickly to place power in the hands of local health workers to respond in times of crisis. Because it's only a matter of time before the next hurricane or pandemic strikes.

"This is the first time we've faced a situation like this in over 100 years, but it's going to start happening more frequently," Cotter says. "We don't know if it's going to be another 100 years or 10 months before the next disease shows up, but we have to get our lessons learned quickly and start preparing for the next one. We don't have any time to lose."

"There's no expert in the world who thinks that this is not going to happen again. We have to get our lessons learned."

— **Tom Cotter**, Project HOPE
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Project HOPE is a global health and humanitarian relief organization. For more than 60 years, we have transformed the health and well-being of people and communities around the world. We work on the front lines of the world's health challenges, partnering hand-in-hand with communities, health care workers and public health systems to ensure sustainable change. Furthermore, as reputable thought leaders, we publish *Health Affairs*, the leading journal of health policy thought and research.

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