

**Ministry of National Security's Response to the Interim Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee (PAAC) on the response of Public Authorities to the COVID-19 pandemic in Trinidad and Tobago, First Session, Twelfth Parliament.**

Report Ref.	JSC's Recommendation	Ministerial Response	Update to Ministerial Response
Page.32	<p><b>1. The ODPM should submit a report to Parliament by January 31, 2022 on its evaluation of the reach of this initiative and the lessons learnt.</b></p>	<p><b>1. Adapting to the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic</b></p> <p>The ODPM took the initiative to develop and promote a COVID-19 'Home Readiness Action Plan' in an effort to support the MOH Communications Unit's messaging as there seemed to be a dearth of information on safety guidelines for persons to follow, while at home and on entering/leaving their homes. The strategy behind the Readiness Plan's promotion was to provide the public with a complementary message to the Department's core message, encouraging persons to develop the habit of having a 'grab and go bag' in the event evacuation became necessary. Both products were promoted using the website, other agencies' websites and via various WhatsApp groupings, where persons were encouraged to re-share the information provided.</p>	<p>The Office of Disaster Preparedness and Management's (ODPM) COVID-19 'Home Readiness Action Plan' was shared in the form of an e-brochure across the ODPM's digital platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and the Website), as well as re-shared with communicators in other Agencies and Ministries. Hence, given the various entities involved and the multiple platforms used, it is extremely difficult to accurately quantify the brochure's full reach. However, according to data acquired by the ODPM on its platforms, excluding WhatsApp, the brochure was distributed to over 9,500 people. The e-publication was included in the ODPM's 2021 Wet and Hurricane Seasons Guide to expand its content. This guide contains general information about how persons should prepare for the Seasons. As a result, the ODPM determined that it was prudent to ensure that COVID-19 issues were factored into emergency preparation. The image and link to this guide were shared on all of the ODPM's digital platforms, but due to its large size, it was only posted on the website, where it was downloaded approximately 18,500 times. In evaluating the reach, the ODPM observed a few long term lessons to be learnt:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage further collaboration, cross-sharing and data gathering by other Government Corporate Communications Departments and the Private Sector.</li> <li>• Seek additional funding to engage a digital media company to boost platform awareness.</li> </ul>

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Page 33	<p>2. The ODPM should submit to Parliament by January 31, 2022, an update on the steps and long term measures taken to address the challenges identified and any lessons learnt.</p>	<p>2. <b>Challenges faced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic</b></p> <p>In the written response provided, the ODPM indicated that a number of challenges were encountered. Such as:</p> <p><b>I.</b> The office's inability to conduct in-person, team, disaster response exercises and drills, due to the health restrictions. ODPM stated that it saw this challenge as an opportunity and quickly pivoted to online platforms, placing emphasis on blended, table top, simulation exercises.</p> <p><b>II.</b> The online solution created additional challenges which required employing collaborative technologies. While previously the ODPM had a Polycom system and used Skype for online collaboration, health guidelines and our 'All of Society' approach to disaster management, caused an explosion in the number of agencies that had to be trained using the online platform.</p> <p><b>III.</b> The organisation needed a platform with greater functionality that will allow for effective, online preparedness training. ODPM explained that this was remedied through the generosity of one of its members who offered the use of his MS Team's account. This provided a short-term solution, until the office was able</p>	<p><b>Parliament is advised that in its previous submission, the ODPM identified seven (7) principal challenges of which four (4) were previously resolved through long term measures that already had been taken. An update on the steps and long-term measures taken to address the challenges identified and any lessons learnt are highlighted hereafter:-</b></p> <p><b>I &amp; II.</b></p> <p><b>Solution:</b> The ODPM utilised additional online platforms (Zoom, Microsoft Teams etc.) that enabled it to expand its reach in conducting disaster preparedness and response exercises, placing greater emphasis on simulations. This proved successful and will continue until the health restrictions are lifted and the environment becomes safer to host national, outdoor exercises.</p> <p><b>III. Solution:</b> The ODPM resolved this issue through assistance from the licences provided by the Ministry's IT Department and iGovtt.</p>

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		<p>to obtain a longer-term resolution through the Ministerial system.</p> <p><b>IV.</b> Need for increased bandwidth. Taking into consideration the number of agencies that were required to be online, initially, the ODPM did not have the required capacity. Therefore, communications during online collaboration were at times unstable.</p> <p><b>V.</b> Restrictions severely hampered the office's ability to procure disaster stores and other items. As a consequence of the lockdown, suppliers were unavailable or constrained to provide the necessary items and products.</p> <p><b>VI.</b> Community outreach activities geared towards engaging, educating and increasing awareness of disaster prevention and preparedness were also stymied.</p>	<p><b>IV. Response-</b> The ODPM achieved increased bandwidth by upgrading its core network-switching infrastructure using layer 3 switches, fibre optic transceivers and installing wireless access points throughout the building. The ODPM also improved its Internet Service Redundancy which is provided by two (2) independent service providers. As a result, there is now a greater balance between wired and wireless networks.</p> <p><b>Lesson learnt:</b> Continuous modernisation and systems upgrades.</p> <p><b>V. Solution:</b> The ODPM's procurement staff doubled its efforts and on most occasions, was able to convince suppliers to make critically needed items available in the national interest. In addition, the Government's gradual easing of COVID-19 restrictions, contributed to the successful procurement of disaster stores.</p> <p><b>Lesson learnt:</b> Maintain strong stakeholder relationships.</p> <p><b>VI. Response-</b>Despite the COVID-19 pandemic stymying physical community outreach activities, the ODPM</p>

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		<p><b>VII.</b> The ODPM Volunteer Programme also felt the negative effects of the Pandemic. The programme was re-established in 2020 to primarily provide specialist support and surge capacity in times of crises. While some online training was conducted, other elements best delivered in-person still has to be delivered, when the environment becomes safer.</p>	<p>continued its disaster prevention education and awareness programme. Videos were produced and these were aired (at a cost) on national radio and television networks as well as on social media platforms. In addition, in collaboration with the Red Cross, a community public announcement and flyer distribution pilot program was launched. This, however, has been discontinued in favour of using mass media, especially given the worsening health situation and the appearance of the rapidly spreading Delta and Omicron variants into the country.</p> <p><b>VII. Solution:</b> As indicated above, because of the worsening public health environment and the possibility of interactive training sessions becoming super-spreader events, the ODPM will continue to utilise online platforms and provide small group training where necessary, until there is a decrease in infection rates.</p> <p><b>Lesson Learnt:</b> Maintain environmental scanning adaptability.</p>

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Page 34	<p><b>3. The ODPM should provide an update on the success and the challenges faced in the implementation of the NDPPM initiative by January 31, 2022.</b></p>	<p><b>3. Preparation to deal with the Hurricane Season of 2021, alongside the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic</b></p> <p>The ODPM stated that it was ready for the 2021 Hurricane Season. The ODPM explained that despite the challenges of COVID-19 pandemic the office continued to undertake activities that would strengthen the nation's disaster resilience. The ODPM implemented a National Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Month (NDPPM) initiative in the month of May which provided an excellent platform for the national community to be prepared ahead of the 2021 Wet and Hurricane season. This year's theme "Disaster Preparedness Starts with You. Let's Prepare Together" was a 'national call to action' involving all communities of interest and placed special attention to the vulnerable population, who were also able to participate in a number of virtual prevention and preparedness activities. These activities were promoted through traditional and digital platforms across agencies.</p> <p>During this period, several activities were implemented to help strengthen individual's, families' and community's resilience against meteorological and hydrological hazards. For example, these activities helped to engage and educate the citizenry on the seven things to do before the Wet and Hurricane season, using a multi-media approach. In the event of a catastrophic impact, there were regional and international</p>	<p><b>3. Building on the success achieved during the NDPPM, the ODPM continues to engage the National Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Committee and other key stakeholders, particularly in the area of national disaster risk reduction. These activities include the ongoing development of the National Comprehensive Disaster Management Policy and the Country Work Programme, which are aimed at strengthening both disaster risk reduction and risk management. These will be elaborated upon later in this document.</b></p> <p><b>Challenge:</b> The principal challenge encountered was the late release of funds, which the Committee received in May, while the programme was already in progress.</p> <p><b>Solution:</b> Committee members and sub-committees became innovative, placing emphasis at the start, on implementing no, or low cost solutions. However, once funding became available, adjustments were made accordingly, contributing to the success of the initiative. Additionally, Private Sector stakeholders contributed in kind to the initiative, which is a strong indication of the 'Whole of Society' approach that is necessary for building national readiness and resilience.</p>

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		<p>arrangements in place, should the country's resources prove inadequate to cope. The ODPM recently tested these systems on three (3) occasions, when national appeals were made in support of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Guyana and Suriname. These tests took the form of national relief collection drives that strengthened many aspects of national preparedness and response, within the COVID-19 pandemic environment.</p>	
Page 35	<p><b>4. (a) The ODPM should provide to Parliament by January 31, 2022 a timeline for:</b></p> <p><b>i. development of the National Comprehensive Disaster Management Policy/Strategy and a supporting CWP;</b></p>		<p><b>4.(a)</b></p> <p><b>i.</b> A series of consultations is presently being undertaken on the draft National Comprehensive Disaster Management (CDM) Policy. On December 21, 2021 it was presented to the Minister of National Security, the Permanent Secretaries and the Heads of Divisions and Agencies within the Ministry. This having been completed, the Ministry of National Security will now determine the next steps and timeline for the Policy's completion. Once concluded and accepted as Government policy, the work on the Country Work Programme (CWP) would then advance towards completion. As the implementation plan for the CDM Policy, the ODPM estimates that the CWP would be completed within six months after the Policy is approved.</p>

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	<p>ii. revision of the organizational structure; and</p> <p>iii. the recruitment of additional staffing.</p>	<p><b>Shortage of Staff and Volunteers</b></p> <p>iii. In the written submission received, the ODPM stated that Cabinet in 2020 designated the ODPM as the focal point and implementing agency for the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (SFDRR) (2015-2030), which is the global strategy Governments agreed for reducing disaster risks. The SFDRR is the successor framework to the Hyogo Framework for Action and focuses on disaster risks versus disaster losses. In addition, the ODPM is the proponent agency for the regional strategy, the Comprehensive Disaster Management approach (2014-2024), which too has evolved since its initial introduction in 2001. Consequently, given the ODPM's expanded mandate under the above-mentioned frameworks, the emergence of new hazards such as COVID-19 and its variants; climate change; global warming; as well as scientists' predictions that disasters would increase in frequency and intensity, the ODPM stated that there was need to increase its staff and volunteer complement.</p> <p>In the interim, the office found a temporary solution through support provided by the MOL's On-the-job training (OJTs) Programme. For the longer term however, the office indicated that it was in the process of developing a National Comprehensive Disaster</p>	<p>ii. &amp; iii. Similar to the projections for the CWP, the revision of the organisational structure and recommendations for the recruitment of additional staff can only be finalised when the Government accepts the draft as Policy. In the interim, the ODPM will continue the requisite foundational planning</p>

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		<p>Management Policy/Strategy and a supporting Country Work Programme (CWP). These initiatives will inform the need for a revised organisational structure and by extension, the necessity to recruit additional staff. Similarly, the need for greater volunteer support has been identified already and in anticipation of this requirement, in 2020, the ODPM re-launched its Volunteer Programme.</p> <p>The office also indicated that the process of developing a Comprehensive Disaster Management Policy/Strategy had started, which for the first time will set a strategic direction for Disaster Risk Reduction and Management (DRRM) in T&amp;T. This strategy will consider the threat posed by COVID-19 pandemic as well as other new and traditional risks.</p>	



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Page 35	<p><b>4.(b) The ODPM should provide a status update on the development of a Comprehensive Disaster Management Policy/Strategy that will consider the threat posed by COVID-19 pandemic as well as other new and traditional risks; and</b></p>		<p><b>4.(b)</b>Kindly refer to the response above at 4 (a) (i) that provides a status update on the development of the Comprehensive Disaster Management Policy/Strategy, which considers an all-hazards approach, inclusive of the COVID-19 pandemic.</p>
Page 35	<p><b>4.(c)The ODPM should also implement new strategies to encourage a greater response for volunteerism by citizens of T&amp;T and provide a status update to Parliament by January 31, 2022.</b></p>		<p><b>4.(c)</b> As advised by Parliament, the ODPM will continue to encourage more citizens to become volunteers. Parliament is advised however that this Office's Volunteer Programme is intended to be a complementary initiative to the many programmes that currently operate within the same disaster management space. Of these programmes, some of the more popular are the ones facilitated by: Tobago Emergency Management Agency (TEMA) and the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government's Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT); volunteers of the Trinidad and Tobago Red Cross Society; the Living Waters Community; SEWA International TT; the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA); 'Is There Not A Cause (ITNAC)'; as well as many other community groups.</p> <p>The ODPM, therefore, seeks to complement rather than compete with these existing programmes, providing surge capacity as needed. Consequently, the ODPM intends to expand the programme at a sustainable rate that will allow it to adequately manage and finance the undertaking, within our budgetary allocations.</p>