

## After the storm

*Laura Ivey arrived in the British Virgin Islands (BVI) as UNICEF's Emergency Coordinator after the devastating hurricanes Irma and Maria wreaked havoc across the territory in September 2017. She has witnessed the developments and the delays, the hopes and the hindrances as BVI has worked to get itself back on its feet. Here are her thoughts:*



Last night, in BVI, there was a storm. It did not reach tropical storm level, but for someone not used to Caribbean hurricane season, it was intense. The wind was strong, whistling and rattling the house. Soon enough though, the storm subsided, and I could hear it moving on into the distance. This morning as I drove to work, I was shocked to see the number of rock and landslides along the steep mountain roads. Trees were uprooted, branches had fallen, even a car, a remnant from 2017's Hurricane Irma, was dislodged from where it had been flung on the mountain last year and rolled back onto the road.

This storm was, of course, nothing compared to the September 2017 Category Five Hurricane Irma and, two weeks later, Maria. These Sisters, as they are called, devastated the British Virgin Islands. The stories you hear are chilling: people swimming for their lives, entire houses falling down around families huddled together, parents saying goodbye to their children, only to find themselves miraculously alive.

### *Like a war zone*

When I arrived in BVI in October last year, I remember thinking that the island of Tortola looked more like a war zone. Buildings were totally destroyed next to buildings that were relatively untouched. What I didn't know was how much the landscape had changed, how many trees were gone. Last weekend at the spectacular Smuggler's Cover beach a friend told me that last year the entire beach perimeter was filled with trees and sea grapes. Today, there are only a couple of straggly trees. When I asked her how long it would take to come back, she said, "I don't know, fifty years?"

I think this is the hardest realisation; that recovery takes much, much longer than people could possibly imagine. Many lost their livelihoods or simply didn't have insurance. Tenants face higher rents or live in homes needing repairs. This stress accumulates, causing depression, health problems, and the inability to cope with the tremendous amount of work still needed to get ready for the hurricane season upon us.

### *Hope and Joy*

But despite these struggles, there is hope and joy in BVI. The daily sound of construction is music to our ears! Every time the scaffolding comes off a newly reconstructed building, a business reopens, or a family moves back home, we celebrate. Just yesterday, a woman was telling a group of us that her business which has been under reconstruction for months, will reopen soon. She was wondering if she should hold a celebration: the overwhelming answer was, "Yes!"

For children, school is a place for children to be children. I am proud that UNICEF has helped to support these learning environments. Since I arrived here in October, UNICEF has helped with the reopening of schools. Though the new learning environments may not look like pre-Irma schools, as many students attend school in tents, in temporary buildings, and in split-shifts. Sandy Underhill, the Principal of Elmore Stout high school realised, "school was much more than a school. It was where [students] could come and have running water, electricity, and the camaraderie of friendships and teachers."

*Returning to Happiness*

UNICEF has worked to make sure children can be children, by helping them and their teachers work through emotional challenges with the Return to Happiness programme. In the upcoming months, 700 teachers and early childhood caregivers will be trained in an expanded programme. UNICEF has also provided supplies and school furniture, replaced resources and helped with school repairs to create nurturing and safe learning environments.

In the spring, UNICEF partnered with the Department of Youth Affairs and Sports to carry-out after-school programmes for adolescents who finished school at 12pm. Over 300 participated in these clubs where they played basketball and volleyball, learned entrepreneurial skills, and took art classes. We had young people who went kayaking through mangroves, who went sailing and who measured the plastic content in the ocean water. They had much-needed fun.

As I drove into town this morning, the sun was shining. Some parking lots were still filled with water, but otherwise, it was business as usual with last night's small storm already forgotten and attention, once again, focused on the day's tasks.