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**Bilateral and regional cooperation in disaster management –
good practices/experiences of Slovenia**

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1. Introduction

The importance of promoting disaster risk reduction efforts and the holistic approach to disaster management at the international and regional levels, as well as the national and local levels has been recognised in the past few years in a number of key multilateral frameworks, in particular the United Nations Hyogo Framework for Action from 2005-2015, and the European Union Civil Protection Mechanism.

The primary and greatest responsibility lies within the states which should put in place effective systems for disaster response and, even more importantly, implement measures to reduce risks and eliminate consequences of disasters. Regional cooperation also contribute to this efforts, and in the South Eastern Europe the regional initiative Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative for South Eastern Europe – (DPPI SEE) plays a crucial role.

Also, the 22nd OSCE Economic and Environmental Forum is to contribute to awareness raising of the growing importance of addressing this topic from several perspectives and levels, thus contributing a less vulnerable and more resilient societies and a safer environment in the OSCE region.

2. Elements of bilateral cooperation, contributing to effective disaster management

The fifth priority of the Hyogo Framework for Action emphasizes the importance of strengthening disaster preparedness for effective response at all levels. In coping with disasters, national resources could be overwhelmed, especially in the event of large-scale disasters. In this respect, bilateral and regional cooperation is of particular importance.

In order to implement the above-mentioned priority, the following elements should be taken into account based on Slovenia's¹ experiences:

¹ Slovenia has a population of about 2 million people and the area is 20.273 m2. The Administration of the Republic of Slovenia for Civil Protection and Disaster Relief is the competent national authority for disaster management, organised within the Ministry of Defence. The Administration consists of headquarters in Ljubljana, including a national emergency notification centre, national training centre and 13 regional offices with 13 emergency notification centres (answering the emergency

2.1 The significance of close cross-border cooperation and regional cooperation should be recognised in strategic national documents, defining national disaster management policy and related sector policies

In Slovenia, the importance of cross-border and international cooperation is considered in the five-year National Programme as the highest policy and planning document for disaster management, and defined in the main legislative act – the Protection against Natural and other Disasters Act.

2.2 Formal agreements, as well as procedures for close cooperation with neighboring and other countries should be concluded or other arrangements established. (Already existing regional and international agreements to be implemented. The mechanisms for coordination of international response to disasters (UN-OCHA with a mandate to coordinate and ensure coherent response to disasters, EU Civil Protection Mechanism, NATO/EADRCC) to be respected).

In terms of cross-border activities, Slovenia has signed agreements for the bilateral cooperation with all four neighbouring countries: Austria, Croatia, Hungary and Italy. Standard operating procedures for fighting open space fires with Croatia are under development.

In the SEE region, bilateral agreements have been signed with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Montenegro, and an agreement is pending with Serbia. Cooperation is also ongoing with Albania and Kosovo.²

2.3 Organisational structures and procedures to effectively implement bilateral cooperation should be established, i.e. joint committees, working/ expert groups, project teams, and other forms.

Joint bilateral committees and sub-committees for cooperation between Slovenia and neighbouring countries have been established, such as joint committees led by directors-general of the competent national organisations and experts' sub-committees (i.e. for the prevention and preparedness of forest fires; early warning and notification, including the emergency call number 112; emergency response plans for joint risks at bordering regions; education and training). Project teams are appointed for implementing specific projects.

2.4 The cooperation should include different levels (national level, border regions, capitals, regions sharing similar risks, etc.) and organisations (national disaster management organisations, rescue services, NGOs, research institutions, etc.).

Cooperation of Slovenia with neighbouring and other countries is taking place between national authorities, bordering regions, between capitals. Different rescue services participate. i.e. fire-fighters, mountain rescuers, cave rescuers, divers, rescue dog handlers, NGOs, universities etc.

2.5 Areas of bilateral and regional cooperation include:

- Early warning, notification and mutual exchange of information on hazards and occurrence of emergency situations and disasters
- Exchange of knowledge and experience
- Joint education, training and exercises
- Rendering assistance in case of disasters, cooperation in international disaster response interventions (arrangements for border crossing in case of emergency)
- Other forms of cooperation.

call number 112). The Slovenian disaster management system merges all professional and voluntary protection and rescue units and services and Civil Protection into one system. These units and services involve around 5% of the total population of Slovenia, the majority of whom exist at local level and carry out tasks voluntarily, meaning that volunteers play a crucial role in the system. Military means also support rescue interventions in case civil resources are exhausted. The main disaster risks/hazards in Slovenia include: earthquakes, floods, forest fires, strong wind with storms, draught, technological disasters.

² Agreements have also been signed with the Czech Republic, Poland, the Russian Federation, the Slovak Republic Intensive bilateral cooperation, particularly in the field of education and training, is also taking place with France, Germany, Sweden and the United States of America, and other countries.

2.6 Funds for the implementation of the cooperation to be ensured through national budget, regional/development funds, financial programmes of international organisations, donors etc.

2.7 Examples of good practices should be promoted and experience shared.

3. Bilateral cooperation – examples of Slovenia’s good practices

3.1 Notification and exchange of information on hazards and occurrence of emergency situations and disasters

Based on bilateral and also multilateral agreements, Slovenian national emergency notifications centre is in regular contact with notification/operational centres in neighbouring countries and also a point of contact for exchange of information with emergency notification centres of EU and international organisations. Regional emergency notification centres from both sides of the border are also in regular contact. The centres regularly test communication means (phone, fax, e-mail) and have pre-prepared forms for quick communication in an emergency. In the event of large-scale disasters and the need for requesting bilateral assistance, national notification centre is in charge

Duty officers in the bordering regional centres 112 are obliged to speak the language of the other country (Hungarian and Italian national minorities), and also English to be able to respond to English speaking callers.

In addition, there is an agreement between the bordering emergency call centres, that the call which has from Slovenian territory reached a notification centre in other country, is redirected back to Slovene emergency call centre to ensure the assistance to person in need.

There is also an arrangement in place, allowing deaf persons to “call” (send a message) to the 112 emergency call centre and get answers via SMS.

In addition, the location of the caller (a person in need for rescue and relief calling to the 112 emergency call centre) can be (with support of the GIS application) identified, which supports quick response to an emergency, in particular in remote areas where the location is not easy to be identified by a person in need.

3.2 Exchange of knowledge and experiences

There are several opportunities for sharing knowledge and good practices. Let me mention an example – the Protection and Rescue Days, which are organised every second year in different cities across Slovenia. The idea of the event is to bring together all relevant stakeholders in the field of disaster management. Responsible national and international institutions, professional and voluntary rescue services, private companies, non-governmental organisations and other experts in the field of disaster management are given the opportunity to present their activities and/or products to the wider public, and to exchange knowledge and experiences. Several seminars, presentations and exercises are organised. One of the main goals is to raise the awareness and educate the population (the three-day event is visited around 17.000 people, including more than 3000 pupils).

Rescue services and national authorities for disaster management from all four neighbouring countries participated with their units and equipment in the Protection and Rescue Days in 2013, which provided an excellent opportunity to exchange technical knowledge and expertise.

3.3 Joint education, training and exercises

The bilateral cooperation between national training centre and other relevant education and scientific organisations with the aim to exchange knowledge, training curricula and training techniques has been established and is promoted in Slovenia, also through national disaster risk platforms. There are joint

cross-border exercises with different scenarios and joint training sessions taking place with neighbouring countries based on annual programmes of cooperation or bilateral projects, financed also by the European Union.

These events include participants from different rescue services and organisations, namely fire-fighters, mountain rescuers, cave rescuers, divers, rescue dog handlers, members of the Red Cross. Training sessions take place either in the national training centre near Ljubljana or other places. The aim is to ensure a mutually agreed and trained approach in responding to cross-border threats.

3.4 Arrangements for joint response interventions in case of forest fires

Forest fire presents one of the greatest risks, in particular in the western and southern part of Slovenia, at the border with Italy and Croatia. Therefore, the arrangements to jointly tackle the risk were put in place. A protocol on cooperation with Italian border region Friulia-Venezia was concluded and arrangements between local fire brigades from both sides of the borders were signed. Also, operational procedures for exchanging information and assistance in/during response interventions in the area under the responsibility of local communities/cities were defined.

3.5 Rendering assistance in the event of disasters

Based on mutual understanding achieved through joint training and sharing knowledge, it is easier to jointly act also in case of disasters. Let us present an example of forest fires in Slovenia in 2012. Three major forest fires in 2012 affected Slovenia in the bordering region with Italy: the first one occurred on 2 August in the slope of Sveta Gora, the second one on 11 August in the region of Črni Kal and the third one on 22 August in the region of Orlek near Sežana.

The first fire has - due to its intensity, high temperatures and wind - spread very fast on a steep slope, containing several unexploded remnants from World War I and World War II. As a result and in particular due to the unexploded remnants, the intervention of firefighters was extremely complicated and dangerous. The only solution to extinguish the forest fire was the intervention of air forces. However two helicopters from the Slovenian Armed Forces, additionally hampered by dense smoke, were insufficient. For that reason, the request for assistance was sent to Italy which has positively replied by providing an additional helicopter and a Canadair aircraft, and thus accelerating the rescue operation. In the second fire also Croatia assisted with ground forces.

4. Bilateral cooperation of Slovenia – examples of cross-border projects

Cross-border projects, mainly (co)financed through EU programmes of territorial cooperation and financial instrument for civil protection contribute significantly to enhanced cross-border cooperation and preparedness for joint interventions in case of disasters.

4.1 Project ALPSar (Alpine Search and Rescue for Slovenia and Italy), 2011-2013. The objective was to enhance cross-border cooperation in the area of mountain rescue. Web-based tools for locating injured/missing person has been developed and procedures for joint rescue interventions were tested through two exercises of Italian and Slovenian mountain search and rescue teams.

4.2 Project GOAL (cross-border cooperation Austria-Slovenia), 2011-2014. The aim is strengthening cross-border cooperation (risk assessment, response plans, notification and joint interventions) in case of major disasters: forest fires, road tunnels safety in relation with hazardous materials, floods. For each of the mentioned scenarios, a large-scale exercise is held involving authorities and rescue units and services of the project area (forest fires cross-border exercise in 2012, joint exercise in the bordering tunnel in 2013, exercise with a flood scenario planned for 2014)

4.3 Project PROTEUS (cooperation in cave rescue between Slovenia and Croatia), 2012-2013. Emphasis is placed on joint training and interoperability in joint response interventions. The large-scale exercise

PARADANA 2013 was held in Slovenia in August 2013. Slovenian and Croatian cave rescuers and other rescue services (150 participants) worked together in a scenario of an accident in a cave about five hundred meters deep.

4.4 Project PFE – Preparedness for evacuation in case of a nuclear accident (partners from Slovenia, Croatia, Romania), 2011-2012. The aim of the project was to improve procedures of notification and readiness for self-protection of population in case of nuclear emergency, and to improve training and equipment of rescue units. In September 2013 a large-scale exercise took place in the bordering area testing procedures for evacuation, decontamination, first aid and temporary accommodation of possibly endangered population in the case of a nuclear accident.

4.5 Project GEP – Common geo-informational system for the protection of drinking water sources in case of disasters in cross-border area of Italy and Slovenia, 2012-2014. The purpose of the project is to establish a uniform cross-border action system for the Civil Protection Service in cases of hazards posed to the sources of drinking water due to technological risks and natural disasters, harmonised by cross-border players. This would ensure the sustainable development and preservation of environment in the border-crossing areas.

4.6 Project LET'S RESCUE TOGETHER (cross border cooperation Slovenia-Hungary), 2013-2015. The aim is to enhance cross-border cooperation through improved notification, alert and mobilisation of rescue services, improved equipment and joint trainings for possible joint interventions in the event of large scale fires and floods in the border area.

4.7 Project MURA-2015 (cross border cooperation Austria-Croatia-Slovenia-Hungary), 2014-2015. The aim is to improve early warning, notification and joint response in case of floods at Mura River (Danube river basin). An exercise with a scenario of large-scale floods in the border region is planned in 2015.

5. Regional cooperation, contributing to effective disaster management - Slovenian experiences

One of the Slovenia's priorities is capacity sharing with countries in the South-Eastern Europe/Western Balkans, both on bilateral basis and through the Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative for South Eastern Europe (DPPI SEE), with the aims to support further development of their capacity for coping with disasters, to support regional cooperation and support gradual integration of the candidate and potential candidate countries in the EU.

5.1 Slovenia's contribution to regional cooperation in South Eastern Europe through regional initiative DPPI SEE

Slovenia has played an active role in the Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative for South Eastern Europe (DPPI SEE) from its very beginning, and held a position of the first chair-in-office in 2007. Together with Croatia, it has initiated the Disaster Management Training Programme, through which more than 1000 participants from SEE were educated and trained between 2002 and 2013. Slovenia has contributed to the Programme with sharing knowledge and good practices at training events. Several trainings in different areas were also organised in Slovenia or supported in other countries.

The main idea of the Slovenian approach is to establish or strengthen regional networks of specific rescue services and experts in their field of expertise, i. e. regional network of cave rescuers, network of fire-fighters, network of mountain rescuers, etc.

Cave rescue training

The Cave rescue training (a five days event) was five times organised by the Slovenian Cave Rescue Association in cooperation with the host country: in 2009 in Montenegro, in 2010 in Macedonia, in 2011 in Bulgaria, in 2012 in Slovenia, and in 2013 in Croatia. All together, there were more than 100 participants from all DPPI SEE member countries trained in cave rescue techniques in last five years.

Hot fire training

Hot Fire Training (a five-day event) was organised in the Training Centre for Civil Protection and Disaster Relief in Ig near Ljubljana (Slovenia), that is four times in the period between 2009 and 2012. The event was supported by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency.

At the training, the participants gained theoretical knowledge and basic practical skills in the field of fire extinguishing, known as hot fire/flashover training. The training is intended for professional fire-fighters and commanders from the DPPI SEE countries.

Slovenia also co-organised or hosted other courses, for example the Disaster Risk Reduction Training Course in 2013. The course provided in an depth orientation on disaster risk reduction concepts and guidance, including the Hyogo Framework for Action.

For 2014, a first training for rescue dog handler is planned in Slovenia for the benefit of all DPPI SEE countries.

5.2 Slovenia's contribution to regional cooperation in Western Balkans through the EU programme on cooperation with candidate and potential candidate countries

Cooperation with South Eastern European countries, in particular the Western Balkan countries has always been one of Slovenia's priorities. Activities to support the European course of the Western Balkan countries in the field of civil protection and enhance their cooperation with the European Union were initiated under the Slovenian Presidency to the EU in 2008 and have been continued. Both, bilateral and regional cooperation, pave the way for regional stability and prosperity. They provide a platform for the exchange of information, good practices, and joint activities, and in the long term, for the integration of the Western Balkan countries into European Union.

From 2010-2012, Slovenia in cooperation with Croatia, Germany and Sweden run the **EU Programme on civil protection cooperation with candidate countries and potential candidates of Western Balkans and Turkey – Exercise Programme**. Main areas of the programme were: training courses, exchange of experts, exercises and workshops with the exchange of good practices in a number of identified topics.

Within the Exercise Programme two **large scale regional exercises** were organised with realistic scenarios of disasters likely to occur in the SEE region. The first regional field exercise with an earthquake scenario (**»IPA SI-QUAKE 2011«**) was organised in Slovenia in October 2011, and the second field exercise with a flood scenario (**»IPA CRO-FLOODS 2012«**) took place in Croatia in May 2012. Each field exercise was preceded by a table-top exercise.

Civil protection intervention teams and experts from all partner countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, FYROM, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey) worked together and practice cooperation in regional rescue operation within the EU Civil Protection Mechanism.

The programme activities contributed to the enhanced administrative and operational civil protection capacities. The Programme also strengthened working relations and regional cooperation among partner countries. The ability to effectively communicate and cooperate during real emergencies was enhanced and demonstrated during latest emergencies in the SEE region in 2012. The programme is continued from 2013-2015, and run by Slovenia in cooperation with consortium partners. Within the programme two regional field exercises, training and exchange of good practices in a number of identified topics will be held.