



OPINION

European Economic and Social Committee

Consolidating the EU-Civil Protection: Mechanism in order to improve the EU's capacity to react in the face of extreme events, including those occurring outside its territory

Consolidating the EU-Civil Protection: Mechanism in order to improve the EU's capacity to react in the face of extreme events, including those occurring outside its territory
(Exploratory opinion at the request of the French presidency)

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1. **Conclusions and recommendations**

- 1.1 The Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM or 'the Mechanism') is no longer sufficiently capable nor wide enough to respond to disasters linked to climate change and multiple risks in terms of prevention, preparedness, warning, planning and operational capabilities, occurring inside and outside the Union's territory.
- 1.2 Beyond its well established activity as regards natural disasters, the UCPM is called upon tackle other risks such as pandemics, assistance to people in war zones, major industrial risks, large-scale maritime pollution, consequences of cyber-attacks on electricity or drinking water networks and all essential infrastructures, or management of humanitarian crises linked to immigration.
- 1.3 The link between civil protection (short-term operations) and humanitarian aid (long-term management) needs to be better addressed and coordinated.
- 1.4 The EESC considers that post-disaster action of the EU for events outside its territory needs to be further identified and developed.
- 1.5 The EESC underlines the utmost importance of evolving operational cooperation through harmonisation of training, compatibility of material and equipment, clarity and efficiency of command chains.
- 1.6 The EESC considers that the need to set up a European agency for civil protection and humanitarian aid should be examined, as a practical mechanism of stronger foreign policy actions.
- 1.7 The EESC draws attention to the necessary progress to be made with regard to the intervention decision-making process, outside the EU territory.
- 1.8 The EESC considers that the diplomatic dimension of European civil protection is not sufficiently developed. As regards external relations and reaction of the EU in the face of extreme events, the EESC underlines the importance of:
 - Focusing on prevention, preparedness and recovery procedures in a more resilient way; working with the UN on Disaster Risk Reduction strategies and the implementation of the "build back better" priority of UN-Sendai Framework of Action to strengthen resilience inside and outside the EU, as a sustainable approach adjusted with the SDGs.
 - Enhancing knowledge sharing, expertise and exchange of lessons learnt, common training and exercises worldwide, including the civil society on the local level.
 - Highlighting links between civil protection and humanitarian aid, especially in isolated areas of the world when a disaster strikes.
 - Including cultural awareness as a key issue of civil protection training to enhance the effectiveness of the UCPM activity (aid deployment) at the area of the disaster, worldwide.
- 1.9 The EESC questions the definition of the geographical scope of the UCPM and the selection criteria of participating countries.

- 1.10 Appropriate communication must be encouraged in the international public opinion in order to enhance the UCPM's action.
- 1.11 The EESC would support the idea of developing joint disaster management first response transnational teams with own resources, joint training and standardisation of resources and equipment.
- 1.12 The EESC encourages a proposal for a legislative amendment to authorise automatic and immediate response under the Mechanism in the event of a mankind disaster inside and outside the EU territory, without requiring a prior request from the Member State concerned, the Member State retaining the right to refuse such assistance. This resource in a form of a task force may contribute to strengthening of the external dimension of EU relations through civil protection.
- 1.13 The EESC supports strengthening of voluntarism for civil protection, recommending the development of standards for volunteering programmes with provisions that guarantee volunteers human and labour rights and the creation of common certification system for voluntary civil protection teams.
- 1.14 The EESC notes the lack of a rapid response flexible financial instrument for providing direct funding to affected populations for compensation, upon request.
- 1.15 The EESC supports strengthening of public information actions concerning UCPM's activity through modern ways of communication (e.g. social media), and an active role of organised volunteer organisations.
- 1.16 The EESC notes the need for further strengthening of cooperation of the Union's operational response with the humanitarian organizations and the civil society for better deployment of the aid on the ground.
- 1.17 The EESC highlights the need of further consideration of ensuring continuity of SMEs in the aftermath of a disaster.
- 1.18 The EESC recommends a stronger involvement of the scientific community in the alert and prevention process of the UCPM, taking advantage of the EU Civil Protection Knowledge Network and the reinforcement of the DRM Knowledge Centre.

2. **Background**

- 2.1 The Union Civil Protection Mechanism, at the heart of the European cooperation on disaster risk management, provides a network of mutual assistance and solidarity inside and beyond the borders of the European Union.
- 2.2 The Mechanism brings together 33 states; 27 EU Member States and 6 Participating States: Iceland, Norway, Serbia, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Turkey. It is used in prevention, planning and operational responses, and enables coordinated aid to disasters and humanitarian crisis situations. Any country in the world confronted with a major disaster can seek assistance

through the Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC), as a foreign policy mechanism of EU.

- 2.3 Already reinforced in 2019 through the establishment of a reserve of additional capacities and through the European Civil Protection Knowledge Network, the UCPM's policy framework has been further strengthened through new legislation published on 20 May 2021. The revised UCPM now includes a cross-sectoral and cross-border approach to risk and disaster management, based on 'disaster resilience objectives', and planning at EU level. On a proposal from the European Parliament, it also incorporates the concepts of climate change and biodiversity.
- 2.4 However, major natural disasters in recent years (mass fires in southern Europe in 2017 and 2021, floods in central and northern Europe in 2014 and 2021, earthquakes in Haiti in 2010 and 2021, etc.), and the increase in their frequency and intensity, undermine existing response mechanisms such as the UCPM, which is also simultaneously confronted with other complex crises (migratory, health, humanitarian). The recent events in Ukraine demonstrate the need to reinforce the mechanism and render more coherent the links between civil protection and humanitarian aid.
- 2.5 For this reason, the French authorities have asked the EESC to work on Europe's response to climate change through three main areas of study: (i) early warning and public information; (ii) forecasting and planning, and (iii) capability response.

3. **General comments**

- 3.1 From an operational point of view, the UCPM has been strengthened by several complementary instruments such as the rescEU reserve of resources, the Copernicus satellite service (a satellite risk mapping system), the European Civil Protection Pool (ECPP) and the EU Civil Protection Knowledge Network (KN).
- 3.2 Set up in 2019, rescEU established a new additional reserve of resources (the rescEU reserve) which includes a fleet of firefighting planes and helicopters, rescue equipment, medical evacuation planes, emergency medical teams, and a stockpile of medical equipment and field hospitals that can respond to health emergencies and chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear incidents. RescEU complements the UCPM in missions such as firefighting, medical assistance and research.
- 3.3 The Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC) is at the heart of the functioning of the UCPM. It centralises and coordinates the different aid sent by countries and is responsible for the rapid deployment of emergency aid to areas affected by disaster.
- 3.4 Countries announce the means they are able to provide to the requesting country using the Common Emergency Communication and Information System (CECIS). The platform enables online records to be kept, where the ERCC can detail the needs of the requesting countries, and where the assisting countries can specify the means they intend to make available.
- 3.5 In addition, participants may commit national resources for emergency response to the European Civil Protection Pool (ECPP). This pool allows better planning and coordination of response

activities at European and national level, which provides a faster and more reliable EU response to disasters.

- 3.6 Supporting prevention and preparedness activities, the EU also increased financial support for capacities registered in the ECPP. The financial support can be used to adapt and repair capacities, as well as to cover operational costs (inside the EU) and transport costs (outside the EU) when deployed under the UCPM.
- 3.7 The Mechanism was triggered several times as part of the EU's crisis management framework during the COVID-19 pandemic. The experience demonstrated that the EU needs to be better prepared to respond to large-scale emergencies, and that the existing legal framework on health and civil protection should be reinforced.
- 3.8 Financially, the Mechanism receives, in addition to contributions from participating countries, a financial envelope from the EU's multiannual budget 2021-2027. More specifically, the financial envelope for the implementation of the Mechanism for the 2021-2027 period will be EUR 1 263 000 000. Furthermore, external assigned revenue from the European Union Recovery Instrument of up to EUR 2 056 480 000 will also be allocated for the implementation of the Mechanism for the same period.
- 3.9 The EU Civil Protection Knowledge Network (KN), a new platform for sharing knowledge, best practices and lessons learned by civil protection experts and emergency management personnel, is an instrument by which the EU intends to strengthen its European Disaster Risk Management.
- 3.10 The KN aims to foster stronger synergies among practitioners, policy-makers and scientists through the pillars capacity development and science, where activities are initiated, planned, designed and implemented. KN's actions include common exercises, bilateral and multilateral exchanges, cooperation and common projects.
- 3.11 As concerns civil protection outside the EU framework, it is important to mention NATO's Euro-Atlantic Disaster Relief Coordination Centre (EADRCC), which offers assistance mainly in cases of natural and man-made disasters, and the United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC), which offers assistance during the first phase of a sudden-onset emergency.
- 3.12 Within Europe, the Union for the Mediterranean platform (UfM), a multilateral partnership focused on increasing the potential for regional integration and cohesion among Euro-Mediterranean countries, including Turkey, endorsed an action plan concerning preparations for efficient mutual assistance in the Euro-Mediterranean area. Among the actions proposed were rapid responses. Key factors include the reinforcement of public emergency service actions through volunteers, and citizens' involvement in saving lives.
- 3.13 The UCPM was activated 382 times between 2007 and 2020. In 2020 it was activated 102 times – 82 more activations than the previous year. Of the 102 activations, 36 were inside the EU, and 66 were outside the EU, with 85 of the total activations related to COVID-19.

4. **Specific remarks**

- 4.1 The UCPM is no longer sufficiently sized to respond to natural disasters linked to climate change in terms of prevention, warning, planning, forecasting and operational capacity.
- 4.2 Sectors such as maritime pollution, industrial risks and disasters on electricity and drinking water networks should be better addressed by the EU Civil Protection Mechanism.
- 4.3 The EESC considers that the diplomatic dimension of European civil protection is not sufficiently developed towards the EU's immediate neighbourhood (notably the Balkans), or towards North Africa and African countries in addition to the EU's development policy. This diplomatic dimension of the UCPM should be exploited in several ways, by (i) strengthening the pre-accession process of candidate countries to the EU, while respecting all accession criteria; (ii) reducing the influence of China and Russia in some countries and geographical areas (Africa, Georgia, Ukraine); (iii) facilitating diplomatic relations with certain hostile countries (e.g. aid in fighting forest fires in Russia or Turkey); (iv) completing the European Union's development aid policy; and (v) engaging with countries directly under Russian influence, such as Kazakhstan, Europe's energy partner, and which are large and are at great risk (of forest fires, for example).
- 4.4 The EESC questions the definition of the geographical scope of the UCPM and the selection criteria for the Member States. For example, accession candidate countries, Switzerland and Moldova should join the UCPM to acquire a truly continental dimension.
- 4.5 With regard to external operations coordinated by the European Commission, when third countries request assistance, it is necessary to specify the conditions and the decision-making process for initiating such operations, paying special attention to transparency.
- 4.6 The EESC also recommends that a civil protection correspondent be appointed in each Permanent Representation of the EU in order to systematically inform third countries of possible EU assistance in the event of a serious disaster, to ensure the necessary coordination with the country's own civil protection forces.
- 4.7 The EESC draws the Commission's attention to the wide disparities that exist today between the different civil protection structures, and stresses the need to harmonise the way in which these forces are organised, in particular in terms of training staff, procedures, and equipment (e.g. the diameters of fire lances differ from one country to another). This disparity can be overcome by organising and standardising standard modules in each EU country. These standard modules are already in place, however increasing their numbers and improving their standardisation must be actively encouraged. For example, forest fire modules in one country may be equipped with road vehicles, and in another country with off-road vehicles.
- 4.8 Moreover, close cooperation between national civil protection authorities, universities and researchers should be strengthened. The implementation of the EU Civil Protection Knowledge Network through the pillars capacity development and science, and the reinforcement of the DRM Knowledge Centre, provide the space and means to strengthen this cooperation.

- 4.9 Regarding resource capacity, the urgent and long-distance deployment of resources over thousands or even tens of thousands of kilometres is another priority. Emergencies often require the use of air assets. If personnel are transported by airliners, then suitable, large-capacity transport aircrafts would be required to transport equipment.
- 4.10 The issue of securing transport capacity could possibly be solved through the use of military, national or NATO aircrafts. However, their use requires due process and involves planning, which is not compatible with emergency situations. Another more suitable option would be to consider a dedicated fleet of large Airbus A330 carriers or punctual rental with specialised companies. An aerial unit of three aircrafts would seem to meet expert expectations. These units are versatile, and the ability to convert them is technically viable, for example for use in situations such as dropping fire retardant to subdue forest fires, and transporting rolling stock.
- 4.11 The acquisition and management of these aerial projection assets could be studied within the rescEU framework.
- 4.12 As regards governance, the EESC calls for the creation of a European civil protection and humanitarian aid agency. Over time, they are often called upon to take action in the same places, with regard to the same populations. Civil protection usually takes place over a short time, days or weeks, while humanitarian aid could take place over months or longer.

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