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COMMUNITY RESILIENCE JOINING UP THE WHOLE OF SOCIETY

PLUS: London multi-agency counter-terror exercise; Interview with EU Commissioner Christos Stylianides; Heat waves in Pakistan & India; Terror attacks in Tunisia; PTSD in Police & Firefighters; Austerity & crisis response



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Cross-border co-operation

Christo Motz, who consulted to an EU programme on strengthening cross-border and inter-sector operability, reports his first impressions of a recent exercise on the Hungarian-Romanian border

The EU-ECHO disaster preparedness programme, strengthening cross-border and inter-sector operability (START), aims to improve disaster preparedness and strengthen co-operation between the various professional and volunteer emergency services (NGOs) in the Hungarian-Romanian border region. My task is to advise how the operational and strategic aspects can be supported and strengthened.

Operational collaboration in this border region is vital, especially as both countries are increasingly vulnerable to heavy rainfall, flooding, ice, snowstorms and drought, resulting in the breakdown of critical infrastructure.

In winter, heavy snowstorms batter the countryside and in the spring masses of water flow down the mountains from Ukraine, allowing little time for this low-lying area to respond. Indeed, on March 15, 2013 a raging windstorm caused a breakdown of critical infrastructure leading to more than 69 villages suffering power cuts. In other regions people were snowed into their vehicles and it took days to rescue those affected.

It is essential to support first responders and relief organisations in the process of co-operation whereby their own responsibility, empowerment, common values and goals are defined and internalised. Physical, mental and technical preparedness are essential. To be able to act flexibly in the case of extreme scenarios, we need a proactive attitude, to be able to think ahead and to practise using disaster scenarios from 'outside of the box'. The goal is to disrupt, decode and thus develop a counter-fragility within the aid organisations and their members, combined with a self-regenerating and improving structure.

It became clear that the Hungarian and Romanian organisations have a long-standing traditional hierarchical structure, leaving little room for personal initiative. All changes and decisions have to be referred upwards in a predominantly bureaucratic regime.

Three days before the second exercise was supposed to take place it appeared that the Satu Mare fire brigade had not received approval to take part from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bucharest. Negotiations had taken over a year and it had been contractually agreed that the Satu Mare firefighters would participate. The problem might have occurred because proper procedures had not been followed.

This shows how co-operation can be difficult when rigid mechanisms are in place and could have consequences for the population of an affected area were a disaster to occur.

The scenario during the second exercise unfolded slowly and deployed on a grand scale. Many participants seemed to have a wait and see attitude. People are still used to centrally orchestrated disaster scenarios where there is no room for coincidence. The script is followed to the letter and outcomes are expected to be as planned.




At the assembly point for the wounded, victims were placed on gurneys/stretchers and registration cards filled in. But the procedure remained neat and tidy, the exact opposite of a realistic scenario. Psychosocial stabilisation and coaching were not applied.

This large-scale exercise was the first of its kind and such co-operation between Hungarian and Romanian first responders and NGOs was unprecedented, so important steps have been made. But more work can be done – a broader perspective would enable reflection upon command and control procedures, training methods and educational levels, as well as identification of the differences in working cultures.

Flexibility in command and control is something to work on. In regular mission command, local commanders and troops would have a mandate to act autonomously and use their own insight within a certain range or for an emergency situation to be addressed effectively.

My proposal is to roll out a different kind of scenario in this border region at the end of September 2015. The scenario will be unexpected and an environment will be created with minimal technical emergency equipment and maximum disturbance. The aim is to strengthen the mutual trust within the teams and between the various organisations, so as to increase the quality of first response; this will realise both the communal and individual targets within this project.

In conclusion, the unbridled enthusiasm of all participating was very appealing and all people taking part fully understood that proper preparation for large-scale flooding is of the utmost importance. 

Co-operation between Romanian and Hungarian First Responders and NGOs was unprecedented, important steps have been made, but more needs to be done, says the author. It is essential to introduce a broader perspective that will enable reflection upon command and control procedures, training methods and educational levels, and to identify the differences in working cultures

Christo Motz

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Christo Motz works as an International Consultant on Survival and Resilience. He is a Member of CRJ's Editorial Advisory Panel