

European and Mediterranean Major Hazards Agreement (EUR-OPA)

Workshop on climate change impact on water-related and marine risks Murcia, Spain 26-27 October

FINDINGS OF THE FRENCH PRESIDENCY OF THE EUROPEAN UNION IN DISASTER RISK REDUCTION AND CLIMATE CHANGE

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I wish to thank the CoE EUR OPA for having organised this workshop and for having invited me to bring to you the findings of the Paris conference organised last November as part of the programme of the French Presidency of the European Union. I am in charge of the international programmes of the French Association for the Prevention of Natural disasters (AFPCN), which acts as the operator for the French Platform for Natural Disasters Reduction.

Before presenting the findings, I would like to highlight 5 important aspects of the Paris conference, because they explain its specific character and why we attach so much importance to it.

Firstly, I would like to emphasise that this conference was a clear indication of the importance attached by the French Government to relationship between the two issues of risk reduction and of climate change. This is why, in the first place, the conference was included in the official list of activities of the French EU presidency programme. In the disaster management community, we all know that risk management is first and foremost a governance issue but it was indeed comforting to hear Laurent Michel, Director of Risk Prevention in the Ministry of Ecology, Energy and Sustainable Development (MEEDDEM) stating that the French authorities looked at the Conference as a natural entry point for addressing the topic of national policies for natural disaster reduction and that they would pay close attention to its conclusions..

The second element is that we wanted to place our discussions in Paris in the context of a fast moving, rapidly evolving world. This is particularly important when examining issues relating to climate change. Too often we cocoon ourselves in one moment of time: we make very good analyses and recommendations for that point in time, but these often become obsolete very rapidly because they are made without reference to future patterns of change. In Paris, we did something rather unusual for a conference devoted to disaster reduction: we looked closely both at the past and the future. We began by spending a whole session discussing the history of past disasters in Europe in relation to climate variations. We examined how our ancestors adapted to these variations, and the impact of climate change on social life and nature. At the same time, in other sessions, we spent a great deal of time, not only analysing current trends, but also discussing in depth the future economic and societal impacts that we expect in years to come. This sense of time and history, we thought, was essential if we wished to draw worthwhile lessons from our Conference. Yves Dauge, president of AFPCN and elected member of the French Senate, said something important at the opening session of the conference, about this-time sensitive approach: "We must move away from small scale thinking, the urge for immediate results and a short term vision," he said. "We should aim in the long run to integrate risk management into a citizen culture, by enhancing public debate and by enabling the collective definition of an acceptable and accepted level of risk."

Thirdly, it was of crucial importance for the French organisers to ensure that the debate

would have a truly European dimension. This Conference was intended for Europe as a whole. We worked very closely with our colleagues from the European network of national platforms for DRR to ensure this continental dimension. To achieve this European dimension, it was indeed important to have up-to-date, comprehensive information on EU policies and mechanisms. Of course, in the EU, risk prevention is a topic that falls first and foremost under the responsibility and control of Member States. However, much added value is to be gained from the EU mechanisms – if we know how to use them - as was pointed out by high-level representatives of the Directorate-Generals for Environment and for Research of the European Union. It was also important to enlarge the European debate in order to cover the policies and activities of the CoE EUR-OPA, our host today and to place the whole discussion within the context of the implementation, through the UNISDR, of the internationally-agreed Hyogo Framework of Action for DRR, adopted during the UN Kobe Conference in 2005.

The final element to be borne in mind is that we were conscious of the need to address during the conference the issue of cooperation arrangements and instruments that would facilitate disaster risk reduction within Europe and among its national disaster communities. In matters of vulnerability and disasters, knowledge is not very useful if it is not applied. This is why the French authorities emphasized in the Conference agenda the importance and role of national platforms for Disaster Risk Reduction. This was done by devoting two sessions, moderated by Ms Schwaetzer, chairperson of the German DKKV, to the present state of cooperation of national platforms. As you know, a DRR national platform is an organisational arrangement which strives to assemble all stakeholders involved in chain of risk management in a given country - from research knowledge to prevention, preparedness, response and rescue, and reconstruction - whether the stakeholders belong to government, the private sector or the associative world. Nathalie Kosciusko Morizet, the French Secretary of State for Ecology, called for increased cooperation among national platforms. The way in which national European platforms for DRR group together is crucial, she stated: links that already exist among them must be considerably strengthened.

The Paris conference was of course much richer in its debates than the summary I have just made. There are whole sections of the debate, such as those related to thematic workshops, the round table on resilience or the economics of disasters, which contain a wealth of actionable information. I wish therefore to suggest that you revisit its proceeds, by consulting the AFPCN's website, www.afpcn.org.

But, you may ask, what are the major priority lessons we derived from the Conference debate itself, which are likely to guide our future actions?

Firstly, we found that there was significant agreement among participants on the fact that the issues of DRR and adapting to climate change had areas of overlap, for example in terms of the requirement for a strategy and a long-term perspective. However, this does not mean that there is confusion between the two; they are two separate fields. What has become clear is that it will be necessary to work in a concerted manner in both fields in the future, since climate change serves to highlight the insufficiency of measures taken so far, as well as the worrying growth of vulnerability of our societies. What seems evident now was not necessarily so a year ago. At that time, some members of the disaster risk reduction community were still not very clear about different aspects of climate variability, climate change, climate adaptation and issues relating to the Kyoto Protocol. There was even some belief that climate change had suddenly become the source of all disasters.

Secondly, we found out that, although we do not know everything concerning disaster risk reduction, we nevertheless know a lot about it. We have in a way overcome the difficulty of "proving" that prevention pays. Indeed we found out that this "proof" is

always provided post facto: when you have not taken the necessary prevention measures, the destruction and misery that follow a catastrophic event, like Katrina for example, indicate the negative impact of the lack of preventivemeasures. So, we found out in Paris that we already have tools in place, as well as experience in using such tools. However, the Conference showed that we need to move forward quickly to keep pace with fast-changing circumstances. Progress and improvements are particularly needed in three areas:

How to put DRR back on the political agenda, i.e the governance issue?

How to genuinely and systematically involve industry as well as local and regional authorities?

How to take action on individual behaviour in terms of explaining, communicating and educating?

Thirdly, the conference showed that there was some agreement on practical steps we need to take to move forward. Action should focus on updating knowledge on an ongoing basis and on adjusting it to changing circumstances. Use should be made of existing European research programmes which are helping to organise networks and to compare methodologies so that trends due to climate change and the modification of society's activities are reflected in the data. More sophisticated management tools must be developed - economic strategy models for situation of great uncertainty for example, or improved early warning systems - which should be shared more extensively and be made more generally accessible. However, it was emphasised at the Conference that we cannot expect science to make decisions for us: especially in matters of climate change, where uncertainties remain, it is up to governments and decision makers in general to take the necessary action, on the basis of the scientific information available.

Fourthly, it was felt that the human and social sciences are insufficiently applied at present in matters of risk reduction. Deliberations and debates on risk perception are essential, as is the developing of decision-making tools. Resilience is a key area, which needs to find new fields of application so that people can take ownership of it. Also - and this needs to be highlighted - debates with partners from developing countries will open productive perspectives. It is two way traffic and both sides can find their benefits.

Fifth point: it was recognized that it is important to define and implement integrated policies at regional level, despite the diversity and complexity of circumstances. Progress has been made in many areas: examples of governance through public private partnerships, as evidenced during the conference, showed the achievements made within the specific context of Europe. However, the conference concluded that we must accelerate the exchanges of experience, lessons learnt and joint pilot demonstrations (and what a better way to illustrate this point than today's workshop and the forthcoming London meeting of ISDR platforms!) We must improve communication, specifically through the development of local debate and a system of bottom-up feed back. It is particularly important, we felt, that the scientific interface should be activated in such a way as to encourage the establishment of scientific networks around the different platforms - an approach that the AFPCN Scientific Council has gradually been implemented since the beginning of the year.

Lastly, the five workshops of the Conference led to specific recommendations concerning the identification of major areas for vulnerability studies and action strategies. With regard to rivers and mountainous areas, progress in our view will be dependent on the development of strategies and better communication. Recommendations also included the need to establish a strong and dynamic training network on risks at the European level. Coastlines and urban areas involve significant stakes; in order to progress in these areas it will be essential to determine a general methodological approach. We are expecting that this workshop will enable to find a way forward with regard to water related and marine risks.

In conclusion, I wish to say that, thanks to the enthusiasm and commitment of all those involved in our Paris seminar, we have been able to lay a sound basis for action at the European level. We believe that the debate, the discussions and the findings provide a good general guide for actions to be undertaken at various levels. In particular, we have become conscious of the fact that one of the better tools for adaptation to climate change is indeed Disaster Risk Reduction.

In this respect, there was also agreement during the conference that the organisational differences between Disaster Risk Reduction platforms of different countries, rather than being a brake, actually enrich and facilitate exchanges. They also strengthen the resolve to work together. As far as our French Platform is concerned, we have strengthened current arrangements in place at the time of the conference. We have given new impetus to our central structure providing advice to the government, the "Policy Orientation Committee for Disaster Risks". This committee includes all concerned ministries and several entities of civil society, represented at a high level. It is now chaired by a member of the French National Assembly, Christian Kert, who is also the president of AFPCN. It provides the guiding principles to the French National platform.

My last word will be about climate change: we hope that European Governments will find a way to make progress on these issues in Copenhagen next December.

Thank you for your attention
Philippe Boullé 26 October 2009