

Local Level Resilience and Pandemic Risk REPORT

Tuesday 13 October

European Week of Regions and Cities 2020

The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), in partnership with the European Committee of the Regions Natural Resources Commission and the Centre for European Volunteering, held a virtual workshop on Local Level Resilience and Pandemic Risk, as part of EWRC2020 and marking the celebration of the International Day for Disaster Risk Reduction.

The event, which brought together speakers from city and regional authorities from across Europe addressing a large virtual audience, focused on exploring experiences and good practices in response, recovery and resilience efforts at local and regional level in addressing the COVID-19 crisis, as well as the role of the EU in this regard.

Moderated by Andrew Bower from UNDRR, the virtual workshop was introduced with an inspiring intervention by Mami Mizutori, Assistant Secretary-General and Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction and Head of the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. SRSR Mizutori's introductory remarks emphasised that resilience is everyone's business and solidarity at all levels is needed. The strain on the system from existing and new risks was emphasised, as was the crucial role of local and regional actors "on the frontline", at the centre for resilience and disaster risk reduction. SRSR Mizutori stressed the need for recovery packages to focus on facilitating local actions and the urgent need for national and local resilience strategies to be in place by the end of the year. She concluded by emphasising that hope is on the horizon; and underlined the timing of this initiative on the occasion of the International Day for Disaster Risk Reduction and the launch of the Making Cities Resilient 2030 initiative.

Noémie Fompeyrine, Chief Resilience Officer from the City of Paris (France) showcased how the COVID19 crisis led the City of Paris to think differently about the existing resilience and risk reduction measures focussed on reducing both acute shocks and chronic stresses in the urban system. She emphasized the need to empower residents to prevent risks and to also respond in cases of crisis. The need to adapt public services to respond to increasing social inequalities was also stressed. The importance of Better Governance was highlighted as a central issue alongside practical actions and reactions.

Cecilio Cerdán Carbonero, Director General of cooperation and global citizenship from the City of Madrid (Spain), drew attention to the fact that many people in Madrid who never thought they would become part of the vulnerable population of the city had, because of the COVID19 crisis, found themselves in precarious economic and social situations. He highlighted that this phenomenon illustrates the need for “joined up” thinking between economic development and social care. He also highlighted how it had been notable to observe how the emergency situation had been able to unlock potential in the citizens and policy leaders in Madrid. The essentiality of the resilience plan was stressed and how its focus on ensuring that any budget investment includes resilience aspects in its design will be crucial to its success.

Roberto Ciambetti from the Veneto region (Italy) and Member of the European Committee of the Regions, shared the main lessons learned from the region’s experience in building resilience to potential future pandemic waves and future disasters. Mr Ciambetti’s remarks echoed the fact that Italy and the Veneto region were one of the worst hit in Europe and worldwide in the early days of the COVID19 crisis, but that the situation was improving. He underlined the importance of the capacity to be flexible and to adapt to changing situations. He also emphasized the need for horizontal and vertical teamwork across different sectors and fields of interest and expertise. In addition, he highlighted the importance of having the ability to quickly evaluate a situation and gather evidence as a basis for mitigating actions.

As Member of the European Committee of the Regions’ Natural Resources Commission, Mr. Ciambetti, highlighted the role of the EU in supporting cities and regions in addressing the recovery efforts to the COVID crisis. He also highlighted the readiness of the EU to tackle financial imbalances but stressed that a common and shared response to disasters is essential. He drew attention to the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, that during the COVID19 pandemic has proven to be insufficient. He stressed the need for something more agile and prompt and that an enhanced version of the Mechanism was urgently needed. He noted the fact that solidarity is a driving concept for the European Union, and that the importance of the Next Generation EU funds should not be underestimated, but that resilience efforts need a longer term perspective that also includes and involves the role of public administration at the sub-Member State level.

Finally, Cristina Piva, Councillor for Volunteering and Education of the City of Padova (Italy), made the critical case that resilience to disasters at local level would not be possible without the contribution and engagement of the community. She emphasized how the volunteering structure in Padova, the 2020 European Volunteering Capital, responded promptly to the situation caused by the pandemic and worked to prevent the health crisis from turning into a social crisis and how the requests for help, the services available in the city and the volunteers available were divided by neighbourhood and geo-localised.

She drew attention to how, across Europe, volunteering is a critical dimension of the capacity of any city, town, or village, to prevent, prepare, respond, and recover in the face of a disaster. Ms Piva gave details of how volunteering has helped the recovery process to the COVID19 crisis and underlined the importance of how pre-existing and trustful cross-sector collaboration has enabled communities to respond to new requests for help and assistance whilst at the same time continuing to meet existing, pre-crisis needs. Ms Piva shared her thoughts on how the EU can support further such indispensable volunteering efforts across European cities and regions. She emphasized the need for the EU Institutions to fully engage to understand the role and importance of volunteering in Europe, stressing that they need to take into account the added value of the essence of volunteering in terms of solidarity, European Values and Democracy, beyond the role of practical delivery of services and tasks. She went on to say that there was a clear need to develop funding and support mechanisms that better reflect this critical role for our social fabric, social capital, social cohesion and communities' resilience to disaster.

Exchanges with the audience allowed for the speakers to reflect on how cities may look to rethink their past approaches, including the scope and implementation of their strategies for resilience at city level to better reflect pandemic risk and other systemic risk in building resilience to future risk. The interaction with the audience also dug further into the role of the EU in supporting and accompanying local and regional actors in recovering from the crisis and building back more resilient systems; a role called upon by the speakers and which needs to be reinforced in the future.

The session was brought to a close by Gabriella Civico from the Centre for European Volunteering, who summarised the inputs from the speakers and stressed the common position that good cross-sector collaboration for disaster preparedness and risk reduction is key for communities of all sizes and situation to face threats together and contribute to common solutions to existing and future challenges.

This session helped emphasise the sheer dimension of the impacts of the ongoing crisis and the challenges ahead. But it also shed light on the efforts to build back better towards resilience to future shocks, which demonstrates the wealth of experiences, innovations and potential opportunities to be learnt from this crisis.