EFDRR Roadmap Action-Oriented Dialogue - Reducing Risk Together: Community Engagement in Disaster Risk Reduction

Interactive Session 3: Volunteering in DRR

Background
Volunteerism in DRR is a powerful means of engaging people. Volunteers play a strategic role in community development processes and in strengthening community resilience to disasters. This session highlighted the multifaceted role of volunteering in DRR, emphasizing its potential to enhance community resilience and contribute to the achievement of the Sendai Framework.

Moderator:
- Marie-Luise Margot Walther, DRR Programme Analyst, UN Women

Panelists:
- Mr. Arsi Veikkolainen, Preparedness coordinator, Vapepa
- Mr. Carlos Mendes, Deputy Director for Prevention and Risk Management in the Portuguese National Authority for Emergency and Civil Protection, Government of Portugal
- Ms. Olia Voropay, Activities coordinator at Shropshire Supports Refugees and coordinator of social projects at All-Ukrainian NGO "Poruch"
- Ms. Bistra Mihaylova, Water & Sanitation Coordinator, Women Engage for Common Future
- Mr. Nebojsa Medojevic, Disaster and Crisis Preparedness Delegate, International Federation of the Red Cross

Summary Notes
In engaging volunteers to support national and local disaster risk reduction efforts, many challenges and opportunities must be considered. These include:

- Training: It is essential to continuously train volunteers and to ensure their long term engagement in volunteering activities.
- Risk and safety concerns: Volunteers must be insured and provided necessary first aid and safety training.
- Coordination and collaboration: Volunteers must be given clear roles and responsibilities. There is a risk of demotivation without a clear role.
- Building community trust: Volunteers must enjoy the trust of the communities they support to be successful. This requires efforts to build the trust of the community.
- Technology use: Technology provides many opportunities to support volunteering, including the engagement of volunteers in DRR activities.
- Limited resources: Addressing the often-limited resources for volunteerism requires adopting a no regrets approach regardless of whether a disaster happens or not.
Volunteering has a key role in improving the life of groups at risks. It brings bottom-up changes and the decentralization of power. Volunteers are a bridge between communities and local authorities.

- Women are often a group at risk, as exemplified by the Albanian Floods in 2019 when women and girls were primarily affected. We need to turn women into DRR agents of change and integrate gender considerations into all DRR activities and policies. Women and women led groups should be engaged in volunteering.

- How to get more women involved in DRR? We need education at early stages. We need to talk to the families and give more relevant experience to them about women’s participation.

Good practices in engaging volunteers:

- In 2017, Portugal had its deadliest ever forest fire season, causing loss of lives and a severe impact on the wildland-urban interface. Climate change scenarios predict that the situation will worsen. The “Safe Village, Safe People” initiative has been established to address this. The National Civil Protection has the overall coordination of the initiative; it creates strategic guidelines and arranges national awareness campaigns and warning systems. Each village participating in the initiative has a local safety officer – a volunteer well known in the community. They are aware of the existing geographical and social context of the community. More than 2,200 villages have joined the initiative, which includes 2,100 local safety officers and more than 2,800 shelters or places of refuge. More than 12,000 citizens have participated in emergency drills under the initiative. Prior to the launch of the initiative, trust in the authorities was low. The initiative, engaging local voices and safety officers, has clearly added value by increasing citizens’ trust in authorities.

- In Finland, there are local response groups, which form a network. These local committees are involved in local preparedness work and their members are part of local communities. In case of emergencies, they can respond before the authorities arrive. They have a standardized way of responding thanks to their training in preparedness and DRR. The network also shares a lot of information and as Vapepa is a part of the Finnish Red Cross, there is a dedicated person for communication.

- Volunteers have been crucial in the Ukraine war in many ways – providing humanitarian aid with partners, mental health support and arranging immediate shelters and transit points for internally displaced people.