Item 4 - Presidency Paper: Citizens' involvement in disaster preparedness and response

In an era of increasing climate unpredictability and geopolitical tensions, the importance of effective disaster risk management (DRM) cannot be overstated. While governments and agencies play legal pivotal roles in disaster preparedness and response, the involvement of citizens is equally critical. Engaging citizens in DRM, both as individuals and through intermediaries such as local organisations, not only enhances the effectiveness of mitigation strategies but also fosters community resilience and empowerment.

Discussions during the Swedish Presidency workshop in January 2023 emphasized the potential of engaging citizens directly in disaster preparedness initiatives. As a follow-up, the prepareEU pilot project was launched in the second half of 2023. The project seeks to deepen our understanding of best practices and explore the feasibility of integrating a European dimension into national risk awareness and preparedness strategies.

Beyond awareness, citizens can also play a more direct way in disaster preparedness and response. By harvesting the knowledge, resources, and collective strength of citizens and communities, authorities can enhance the effectiveness of DRM initiatives, build resilient societies, and mitigate the impact of disasters. A direct involvement of citizens in the disaster risk management provides opportunities to strengthen our resilience, but also challenges to overcome and new approaches to be found. Finding a good balance between them will be the key to unlock the full potential of citizens' involvement.

During the Belgian Presidency workshop held in Antwerp in January 2024 on **"the UCPM within the EU risk management architecture"** one full session was dedicated to the relationship between the UCPM and citizens. From this session, several recommendations were made to enhance citizens' involvement in a whole-of-society approach in response to disaster risk management, such as:

1. Future communication campaigns should focus on the positive empowerment of citizens, encouraging them to take a proactive role in disaster risk management.
2. Support should be offered by the UCPM to promote long-term disaster risk management education efforts from kindergarten to university, with a whole-of-society approach. This could utilize existing programmes such as Erasmus, or tools such as the Knowledge Network, and PrepareEU. Directing financing to education and training campaigns, resources, and toolboxes adapted to different generations and the most vulnerable groups is crucial in this endeavour.
3. Training of community leaders, including volunteers, local leaders, and credible influencers should be emphasized.
4. Local communities should be empowered and encouraged to identify expertise and capacities available with citizens, the private sector, NGOs, academia, etc., to support disaster risk management. This could include UCPM actions such as supporting the establishment of a "local citizens capacities network."
5. Create non-binding guidelines on citizens' participation based on existing national best practices.

Taking into account these recommendations and opportunities, it is clear that challenges persist in involving citizens in the risk cycle, ensuring coordination among stakeholders, and to recognize citizens as active participants in disaster response efforts.

In moving forward, it is important to set clear priorities in building up this enhanced citizens' involvement in disaster preparedness and response. By combining our experiences, knowledge and work and exploring innovative approaches, we can benefit from the potential of citizens within the UCPM tasks and contribute to building more resilient communities.

Questions:

- In the recommendations on involving citizens in the whole-of-society approach in disaster risk management developed during the Belgian Presidency workshop, which of these has the highest priority for you?
- To establish the most effective complementary approach, what actions do you believe Member States and Participating States should take, and which initiatives could the Commission take in contributing to the implementation of these recommendations?
- How could the Knowledge Network support the UCPM, Member States and Participating States in implementing these recommendations?
- From best practices and experience in your country, do you see another essential recommendation that is missing?