



Recording and Evaluating the Role of Volunteers Regarding Natural Hazards Prevention and Disaster Management in Greece

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The role of volunteers in disaster management is of decisive importance, particularly for major catastrophes. In Northern Europe, volunteers are the main group that responds even in regular low impact incidents. On the other hand, in Southern Europe, state professionals hold the primary role. This is partly cultural, but it is also defined by the different types of hazards involved. For example, Southern Europe suffers from earthquakes and wildfires that can cause severe and widespread damage. This implies that there is a need for highly trained and skilled personnel, not only for efficiency purposes, but also in order to avoid casualties among the operating staff. However, the need of volunteers' involvement is well recognised both for prevention measures (mainly regarding forest fires) and for disaster management purposes particularly during major catastrophes whereas the professional personnel are outsourced. Moreover, the economic crisis stretches the public sector, decreasing the capability and resources of the state mechanism. The latter increases the need for the volunteers' active participation, which is also regarded as cost effective.

Greece has a short tradition regarding volunteers and their official involvement with natural hazards. This is also due to the fact that civil protection has a short history in Greece, since it was established in 1995, whereas its legal framework was only shaped in 2002. The act 3013/2002 introduces officially the role of volunteers within the legal framework. In particular, the act N3013/2002 offers a detailed description of the role of voluntary organizations within the civil protection system, the interagency cooperation, and the financial instruments through which the various bodies secure their funding along with the establishment of an inventory from the General Secretariat of Civil Protection. However, several provisions described in the 2002 Act have not been applied yet. For instance voluntary organizations are not insured and not properly trained. The Civil Protection Research Center designed to provide training to civil protection officers and volunteers by the 2002 act, was never established. Moreover, following the economic crisis in Greece, its establishment was cancelled.

Overall, volunteers are scattered in small groups with a predominant local supportive character and resources. However, despite the lack of support a few volunteer groups manage to organise and set up a significant network across the country. Two of these organizations are the ESEPA (The Voluntary Corp of Greek Firemen and Replanters) focused on forest fires and HRT (Hellenic Rescue Team) focused on earthquakes. Lately both groups started to cooperate by setting up a bilateral agreement. As one of the major problems is the lack of training, these groups try to cover this important gap by establishing training camps or executing regular drills in coordination with state agencies.

Despite their short history volunteer groups are highly valued by the municipalities' civil protection officials. Working through a LIFE+ project on "Local Authorities Alliance for Forest Fire Prevention - LIFE08/ENV/GR/000553" which is implemented with the contribution of the LIFE financial instrument of the European Community, we conducted the largest questionnaire survey in Greece regarding Civil Protection issues, among the municipalities of Greece. Overall 36% (117/325) of the country municipalities responded (heads of civil protection offices), offering an adequate statistical sample. Results showed that in 66% of the municipalities, volunteers get involved in forest fire prevention actions. From these municipalities 67.5% evaluate the volunteers' involvement as necessary, 27.5% as supportive (subsidiary) and 5% support that their involvement is not substantial. However, only 41.5% replied that they keep registry of each voluntary organization, regarding its capabilities, availability and equipment, whereas 42.5% support that a record does exist, but it has not been properly exploited and finally 16% keep no records.