



**Azienda ULSS 20 - Verona**  
Sede legale: via Valverde n. 42 - 37122 Verona  
Tel. 045/8075511 Fax 045/8075640  
Cod. Fiscale e P. IVA 02 573090236



**Recommendations for Best Practice  
for Considerations of Disabled Persons  
when Designing Rapid Reaction Protocols and  
Simulation Experiences in Case of River Flooding**

## **FSD Final Conference - Verona, 23-25 February 2009**

### **Introduction**

The project titled “Flooding: Rapid Response and Simulation Schemes for the Safety of Disabled”<sup>1</sup>(FSD), co-financed by the European Commission's DG Environment, was developed from January, 2006 to February, 2009.

Verona's ULSS 20 was in charge of coordinating the project and the partners involved were: another Italian public body, Ferrara's USL, an Irish NGO called “Hope Project”, a Spanish NGO called “Códice Europa”, and Hungary's “Disaster Management and Civil Protection Association of Miskolc Region”.

The first part of the project was tackled simultaneously with the final phase of the project named “Rescuing Injured Disabled Persons in case of Disaster” (RDD), that was also co-financed by the European Commission's DG Environment, and that ended with a Consensus Conference held in Verona, Italy, on 8-9 November, 2007.

The “RDD” provided the essential background for the “FSD” project. In fact, it produced some practical and theoretical prerequisites which the project in question could be based upon, and the “Verona Charter on the Rescue of Persons with Disabilities in case of Disasters” originated from the “RDD” project too.

Such a document, which was presented during the Consensus Conference, was approved and undersigned by fifty participants, including thirty representatives from public bodies and private organisations operating in the fields of civil protection and disabled people care.

### **Legislative background**

The Verona Charter's Preamble includes references to the main international and EU regulations concerning the principle of equality of all human beings<sup>2</sup>.

With reference to the specific right of disabled persons to receive proper rescue services to ensure their safety in case of emergency, the starting point still is nowadays, as it was then, the 2006's United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, whose Art. 11 binds States Parties to “*take, in accordance with their obligations under*

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<sup>1</sup> Grant Agreement No. 07.030601/2006/448102/sub/a3.

<sup>2</sup> “*Verona Charter on the Rescue of Persons with Disabilities in case of Disasters*”, Verona, Italy, November, 2007.

*international law, including international humanitarian law and international human rights law, all necessary measures to ensure the protection of safety of persons with disabilities in situation of risk, including situations of armed conflict, humanitarian emergencies and the occurrence of natural disasters”.*

Furthermore, in a resolution of the European Parliament on natural disasters, issued on 4th September, 2007 it is stated in Art. 19 that the Parliament “*Stresses the need to take special care in cases of natural disasters of the specific needs of people with disabilities in all actions undertaken using the Civil Protection Mechanism”.*

An in-depth analysis of laws and regulations that are currently applicable in Partner States that took part in the project titled “*Flooding: Rapid Response and Simulation Schemes for Safety of Disabled*” (FSD), highlights the lack of specific laws concerning the rescue of disabled persons in case of river flooding, in particular, as well as in the event of other kinds of natural or man-made disasters.

Therefore, the issue of disabled persons' safety is included in the wider domain of the rescue of persons who have motor difficulties, or who cannot move at all due to serious wounds.

## **Project's setting and operational background**

### *River Flooding – The most common form of natural disaster in Europe*

The project FSD started from the consideration that there has been a general increase in the frequency of severe river flooding in Europe, as evidenced by famous catastrophes, a phenomenon which seems likely to continue in the future<sup>3</sup>. In particular, in Spring 2006, heavy floods inundated central and Eastern Europe, causing widespread damage and forcing thousands of people to leave their homes. In fact, extreme floods are the most common natural disasters in Europe<sup>4</sup>, making preparedness and rapid reaction protocols a priority at the local, national and European levels. Furthermore, as many of Europe's most important rivers are transboundary, co-operation at EU level can bring added value to the efforts of individual Member States.

### *Preparedness and Rapid Response – The Key to Effective Intervention*

The European Community has developed a series of measures and actions in the field of civil protection to provide a common response to different emergency situations in an efficient and coordinated way. Rapid response and preparedness are identified as key features of an effective intervention strategy and are treated both in the Community Action Programme in the field of civil protection<sup>5</sup> as well as in the Community Mechanism for Civil Protection<sup>6</sup>. In order to develop further the rapid reaction strand of the Community's integrated approach, a proposal has been set forth by the Commission

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<sup>3</sup> COM(2004)472 final – Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – “*Flood risk management: Flood prevention, protection and mitigation*”.

<sup>4</sup> EEA Briefing No 01/2005 “Climate change and river flooding in Europe”.

<sup>5</sup> Council Decision 1999/847/EC of 9 December 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Council Decision 2001/792/EC, Euratom of 23 October 2001 establishing Community mechanism to facilitate reinforced cooperation in civil protection assistance interventions.



for a Council Regulation establishing a Rapid Response and Preparedness Instrument for major emergencies (COM(2005) 113 final of 6 April 2005).

### *Simulation Schemes*

Simulation schemes are one of the measures implemented by the Commission for the enhancement of preparedness when responding to natural or manmade disasters. Indeed simulation exercises are organised on a community level but also on a national, regional and local level.

### *Persons with disabilities – Need for a better consideration of their needs in case of flooding*

Some years ago, in the United States, Hurricane Katrina demonstrated how evacuation plans often overlook those who are most in need of protection. Despite experiences from previous hurricanes, such as Hurricane George in 1998 and Hurricane Ivan in 2004, which revealed to state and local authorities that a significant portion of New Orleans' population, mostly the poor, disabled, and elderly, would be incapable of evacuating the city without the provision of city and state transportation systems, city officials continued to develop failed evacuation plans that did not take into consideration the portion of the New Orleans population that would be unable to escape the wrath of a hurricane. Consequently, the victims of Hurricane Katrina were disproportionately the poor, the elderly and persons with disabilities.

That lack of preparedness in the rescue of the disabled could probably be confirmed by what happened during the more recent “tsunamis” (December 2004, July 2006), but data concerning our target groups were not properly collected and made available.

## **Methods used to develop recommendations, as part of FSD Project**

FSD project activities stemmed from some complex issues that had emerged from the previous RDD project, and were aimed at verifying the topical interest and the extent of such issues, with a special focus on river flooding.

A close study of available literature and laws, of existing simulation schemes, and of past experiences in case of river flooding, together with other activities performed during the Project, highlighted the following critical issues:

- Lack of adequate consideration of the needs of persons with disabilities in case of river flooding within the legislation concerning the management of such events, as well as other natural or man-made catastrophes;
- Lack of specific measures in rescue protocols for the rescue of disabled persons. with reference to the different kinds of disabilities;
- Lack of experience exchange through field simulations between the emergency services of the various European Union Member States: ;
- Too few rescue simulations involving disabled persons as active participants;
- Lack of special equipment for the rescue of disabled persons, especially in public places;



- Lack of an analysis of needs perceived by disabled persons in the event of river flooding.

### *The Focus Group tool*

The last issue to be tackled concerned the Focus Groups conducted for three Project areas<sup>7</sup>. That helped to understand how the needs perceived by disabled persons may vary according to specific kinds of disabilities and, very often, they are not known or considered relevant by emergency service operators.

In fact, for such operators what seems to be important is whether the person can move by him/herself or not – something which is undoubtedly useful from the operational point of view, but that does not ensure the person's cooperation during complex rescue operations.

Those persons who were affected by a motor disability felt a general lack of trust in emergency services, together with limited knowledge of their methods of intervention.

### *Final Conference's Workshop Session – Comparison between representatives from emergency services and disabled persons associations.*

In order to deal with the sensitive issue of the relationship between emergency services and disabled persons, to promote an exchange of knowledge and experience, plus to produce some useful recommendations, a Workshop Session was organised during the second day of the Final Conference (24 February, 2009).

Conference participants, i.e. representatives from emergency services and disabled persons associations, were divided into four Working Groups devoted to the following issues:

- “*Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*” versus current legislation appropriateness;
- The perceived needs of persons with disabilities in case of river flooding or similar situations;
- Evidence - Comparing different experiences from participating countries. Rapid reaction protocols (e.g. POS in Italy:) - Identification of knowledge and limits;
- Future perspectives - To look for possible communication links between the two main actors of the FSD project.

### *Plenary Session of 25 February 2009: Final Recommendations.*

During the plenary session of 25 February, a presentation was made for some draft recommendations for best practices concerning persons with disabilities when designing rapid reaction protocols and simulation schemes in case of river flooding.

Participants were also given a copy of the “*Verona Charter*”.

The “*Recommendations for Best Practice for Considerations of Disabled Persons when Designing Rapid Reaction Protocols and Simulation Experiences in Case of River Flooding*” were developed by integrating the main issues of the “*Verona Charter*” with ideas/suggestions that were put forward during the Conference, in particular by Working Groups.

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<sup>7</sup> See “*Procedure Protocol To Set Up a Focus Group*” (Annex XVII) and “*Focus Group Summary Report*” (Annex XVIII).



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- Measures to ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities in situations of flooding should be enshrined in legislation applicable in all EU Member States.
- It is of utmost importance that a common number for emergencies is activated in all EU Member States. It would be each government's responsibility to provide such a number.
- International, national, regional and local teams should be set up in order to deal with flooding disasters involving people with disabilities, their advocates, and other services.
- People with disabilities represented by their organizations or caregivers should also assume responsibilities by informing relevant authorities of their perceived needs in emergency situations.
- Town planning is important too in order to prevent emergencies and help disabled people. Consideration should be given to risk map analysis of different areas taking into consideration housing types and population density. That should affect zoning regulations in some areas and act as a prevention mechanism.
- Private organizations and governments should be urged to manufacture technological products (special devices, mobility aids, rescue equipment, etc.) that should be more accessible to persons with disabilities.
- Alternative communication techniques such as texting and the use of images should be developed so as to include all persons with disabilities, regardless of the type of disability and language.



- Agreed international equipment standards should be developed and also the harmonization of developing technologies at European level.
- Stakeholders and disabled persons too should undergo training and awareness sessions on the issue of disabled persons' safety in case of floods.
- Persons with disabilities should be properly trained by experts of the emergency services through specifically tailored training activities and active participation in simulation exercises related to flooding.
- Persons with disabilities should be properly informed by rescue service experts about:
  - a) emergency numbers active in their own countries;
  - b) rapid identification of emergency situations with regard to flooding and natural catastrophes;
  - c) training opportunities.
- Awareness and responsibility of disabled people themselves in relation to risk management in case of flooding should be implemented using media, radio stations, texting, etc.
- For persons with multiple disabilities it is important to combine tactile symbols and warning sounds.
- A map of persons with disabilities should be developed for each area. The map should include their specific living conditions and needs for physical and/or psychological help in case of river flooding and/or natural and/or man-made disasters. Data will be gathered and managed accordingly to disabled persons' informed consent.
- Rescue service experts should receive adequate information and training about physical and psychological needs of persons affected by disabilities in case of river flooding and/or natural and/or man-made disasters.
- Rescue service experts should participate in simulation experience involving colleagues of other EU Member States.

