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COOPERATION OF CRISIS SERVICES WITH MEDIA DURING FLOOD EVENTS

Discussion paper transmitted by the Government of Poland¹

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¹ This discussion paper has been reproduced in the form in which it was received by the secretariat.

Extreme events like floods constitute a threat to life, health and prosperity of citizens.

Information about the possibility of the phenomena occurrence, detailed forecasts and current information concerning the course of phenomena, damage caused and progress in the battle with natural disaster are the most sought-after information.

The European Union citizens are entitled by the law of each of these countries to obtain reliable and full information, as well as information concerning the course of phenomenon.

According to the American political observer Harold Lasswell, citizens are entitled to three types of information:

- Information about changes in the environment and surroundings posing definite threats but also chances,
- Information about the most effective action aiming at the limitation or elimination of consequences of natural disaster,
- Information about the best models of behaviour, action and response which improve man's safety in the environment.

The right for information is exceptionally difficult to guarantee during times of crisis, when both crisis centre and media are subjected to various kinds of pressures.

Within hydrological services, there are a few levels of information during flood events.

The forecast system belongs to the first level and concerns hydro-meteorological phenomena – the results of this system functioning most often cause conflicts with media in the first stage of the flood event.

The threat announcement time, phenomenon progress forecast, etc. are usually debatable.

Some information in the media shows that up to now there has been mutual lack of cooperation in this field. Unprepared journalists start to interpret received data in their own way. One of the mistakes, most frequently occurring in the majority of flood events in Europe, is the regarding of flood wave magnitude as presented by the crisis centre water level, which causes panic. The wave phenomenon, described in literate meaning in popular media was also the cause of many threats.

The second level of information is the information given by local crisis centres, of great importance to people from flooded and threatened areas. Here are commands and advice with great practical significance, essential for the safety of people.

The third level consists of information from national crisis centres – also concerning general situation in the country and region, and information in the field of law, economics and insurance.

Media during flood events can be classified into three basic groups, according to the character of information provided.

- Forecasts, however without the possibility of effective warning action (press),
- Forecasts, all types of warnings, which can constitute premises for the occurrence of sudden phenomena in a definite period (TV, newspapers),
- All types of forecasts, which can constitute the source of information about sudden phenomena (TV, radio).

Each of the above-mentioned types of media has different source of conflict and requires different organization of cooperation with the crisis centre.

Periodicals, published in weekly cycles (which exemplify the 1st type of information), need different material; the desirable information is composed of broad analyses of the pre-flood period, i.e. preparations for the flood, undertaken before the emergency, specific threats, interesting cases from the rescue operation, social, political and economic context of the flood.

The materials should comprise data of the flood history, describe the phenomena in broader context, as well as comprise analyses and possible forecasts concerning further course

of the phenomenon both at the aspect of further course of hydrological-meteorological phenomena and expected losses and damages.

The second type of information is constituted by daily newspapers and TV, which can both provide information concerning the course of phenomena, and are the source of training for areas affected or threatened by the flood. Crisis centre announcements and current information are particularly important here, as well as the repetition of conventional signs used during the flood-defence operation (this system of information was really successful during flood-defence operations in Poland).

In the third type of information there are mainly radio and TV.

General accessibility of radio facilitates presenting the information at real time, which helps fast and efficiently use this means of communication by crisis centres.

It is essential to ensure the authentic time when the crisis centre announcement would be issued, however this is problematic in case of commercial radio stations.

Radio is a means that comprises the features of all the above-mentioned types of information. During every crisis situation there are conflicts between media and crisis centres. This applies to all natural disasters, hostilities, ecological catastrophe, etc.

Every conflict has a similar course, and the dynamics of occurrences depends on the course of the crisis situation – nevertheless, the anatomy of the conflict remains the same.

Conflict is as complex as the phenomenon which caused it indirectly. It proceeds at a few levels, is related to various events at the same time, and refers in details to the specifics of events.

The conflict consists of:

- Basic dispute – this concerns the heart of the matter, i.e. all matters connected with the flood management
- After words have been exchanged concerning the difference of opinion on methods of carrying out the operation, the dispute becomes very emotional. In many cases the subject matter of the conflict, for example a problem of warning dates, is replaced by actual names, thus the actions of the parties are modified.

Little by little, the discussion becomes meaningless because the emotional base of the conflict reduces or even makes it impossible to order the situation logically.

- In case the conflict runs, other contradictions appear, which to great a extent reduces the efficiency of informing the society.

Like all participants of the operation, the media representatives are also liable to emotional swings after they have been in danger for a long time, often in contact with destruction, with people in fear and total despair resulting from the loss of the closest people or property, or in persistent contact with depressing view of destruction caused by the flood. These states are often transmitted to presented material in a very emotional form, and crisis centres require that the presented material should be objective.

I observed the press representatives, apparently exhausted and without faith in victorious battle with the element, in the first town along the Oder river, which defended itself against the flood – in Slubice.

A critical situation requires not only a swift and expert hydrology – meteorology information combined with hydrological advisory services adjusted to altering hydrological – meteorological conditions but also the information of administrative-legislative-economical character which will make attempts to solve problems in the period „the day after”.

During numerous meetings and consultations, which took place after the great flood in 1997, the representatives of crisis centres and media tried to find common solutions concerning the creation of information system during the occurrence of extreme phenomena. They reached several positive agreements on constant consultations related to the flood problems.

The establishment of the shape of the crisis anatomy between the media and crisis centre

by Reughter representative, Bernard Daguany, was one of the most important achievements of the meeting.

STAGE ONE

Situation: occurrence of a crisis situation

Media: Media present truthfully and comprehensively the existing situation making use of such sources of information as opinions of local, central government, self – government, witnesses, experts and various institutions, including the crisis centre. The media fully comply with the Press Act and the Radio and TV crisis centre.

Effect: Information in media is received by the general public with interest.

STAGE TWO

Situation: The phenomenon which initiated the crisis develops, the troublesomeness of the consequences increases.

Media: Symptoms of some conflict begin to appear, first accusations of the media of being biased, manipulated or unprofessional can be noticed. The accusations can be attributed to three reasons:

- a group of media failed because they acted poorly,
- a group of media begins to represent someone's interests, e.g. one political option,
- Media function well but are not critical enough.

Frequently, one of the causes of this situation is the fact that the crisis centre releases insufficient information fearing an excessively critical or alarming tone of the media.

Effect: the reliability of the media is put in jeopardy.

STAGE THREE

Situation: The phenomenon develops further, the troublesomeness of the consequences still increases first unpropitious forecasts of “the day after”.

Media: Mass media become participants, begin to play a separate role, they stop being intermediaries passing on information and become another participant of the on – going action. Initially, they try to remain neutral; from being an information transmitter, they turn into a source of information. They provide their own information, independent experts; by providing additional information, they try to improve their own image among the general public insisting that they are independent, not manipulated.

Effect: The recipients of information become polarised into those who lost their confidence completely and do not believe media any more and those who begin to “realise” hints given by individual journalists (not consulted with crisis centre).

STAGE FOUR

Situation: The situation deteriorates further, the troublesomeness of the consequences increases, the forecasts about “the day after” are very worrying, considerable losses are predicted and long period of reconstruction feared.

Media: In the result of their actions, media are criticised by the authorities, especially by the crisis centre, who try to regain control over the media and restore their role to that of the intermediary. Accusations refer to:

- Mistakes in information,
- Irresponsibility in “creating” information,
- Excess of emotions, or even spreading panic,
- Lack of professionalism,
- Making it difficult for appropriate bodies to act.

Effect: The crisis between crisis centres and mass media becomes more acute at the expense of ordinary participants of the disaster whose life, health or property is constantly threatened.

STAGE FIVE

Situation: Termination of the disaster situation; losses in human life, crops, animal, property, equipment etc. remain.

Media: Mass media proceed to defend themselves or even counterattack rejecting accusations pointing to:

- Bureaucracy,
- Delays in actions,
- Lack of preparation,
- Lack of discipline and organisation,
- Lack of strong will,
- Abuse of power
- Attempts of political manipulation.

Effect: After a stage of discussions and accusations and counteraccusations and criticism, the problem remains open until next crisis.

Meetings and workshops have been organised whose main objective was to elaborate appropriate methods of cooperation between crisis centres and mass media. It appears that cooperation methodology has already been worked out and what remains to be sorted out is full mutual understanding but this requires joint actions, wider hydrology – meteorological education of rural communities, utilisation of a more extensive information data base – internet in particular – whose main advantages are:

- Work in real – time,
- Possibility of continuous update of information,
- Multi – faceted circulation of information,
- Possibility of using independent sources.

The co-operation of hydro-meteorological services with mass media via crisis centres during the period of the occurrence of crisis phenomena is of paramount importance for the battle with various threats.

Fair and honest information of the general public about threatening disasters must fulfil two conditions. The first of them is the dependability of the information source and guarantees of its quality and consistency. The second one is connected with appropriate knowledge of journalists and skills to pass it on to the general public.