

23rd OSCE Economic and Environmental Forum “Water governance in the OSCE area – increasing security and stability through co-operation”, Session V: Water governance from different stakeholders’ perspectives

Address by Head of OSCE Mission to Serbia, Amb. Peter Burkhard

Your Excellencies,
Dear delegates,
Dear participants,

- Thank you for inviting me to present the work of the Mission to Serbia in the area of civil society participation in water governance. Today’s forum gives me an excellent opportunity to share with you our experiences and lessons learned.
- Natural disasters affect communities regardless of borders but also of ethnicities, gender, religion or age, and impose damage that require months, even years of recuperation.
- On the other hand, disasters also offer opportunities for international and regional co-operation and confidence-building measures. The Mission to Serbia has seized this opportunity providing support for a number of initiatives in environmental matters.
- Our projects in this area are a means to enhanced human security and democratization. For example, the Mission is among the few field operations having a sizeable footprint on flood prevention.
- Let us see how these activities fit into our mandate. Our efforts in environmental governance mainly aim at enhancing state authorities’ accountability and transparency as part of the overall democratization processes in the country. Water management provides a concrete example of our work with communities and civil society organizations to ensure democratic inclusion and gender mainstreaming.
- Our main contribution consisted in introducing comprehensive, inclusive practices and fostering civic participation in environmental management. In other words, we brought different stakeholders together to ensure citizens’ participation in matters that clearly affect the mere survival and welfare of their communities.
- In this light, please allow me now to present our work in **water management**. Let me start by highlighting our long-term efforts to help improve flood management practices in Serbia, which started way before the disastrous events of May 2014. By organizing study visits and encouraging stronger engagement of civil society in the most affected areas, CSOs acquired a better understanding of community needs and their role in flood prevention activities.
- The presence of Aarhus centres in Kragujevac, Nis, Novi Sad and Subotica ensures extensive country-wide geographical coverage. Secondly, Aarhus Centres always rely on partnerships with state institutions to ensure long-term sustainability of joint projects.
- The success of projects implemented by Aarhus centres is due to a variety of factors, such as their ability to facilitate dialogue among stakeholders, their connections with the academic world, and their expertise in building partnerships between community members and local authorities.
- More recently, the Mission garnered support from five state institutions with a mandate on flood management. This led to the establishment of the Flood Risk Action Alliance for the Timok River basin in east Serbia, in conjunction with Aarhus Centre Nis.
- After identifying the most at-risk communities as targets, the Alliance agreed on an Action Plan aimed at strengthening community resilience to floods. Aarhus Center Nis organized an outstanding flood risk disaster awareness campaign as part of its responsibilities within the Action Plan.

- In the coming months, the Flood Risk Action Alliance model will be replicated among communities living along the south Morava river basin, in Vranje, located in the furthestmost southern part of Serbia.
- The Mission also focused on promoting water legislation aligned with international standards among key stakeholders. To this end, we organized awareness raising events with a total of 650 representatives from the business community, local authorities and Civil Society Organizations, in locations across Serbia, from Subotica, in the north, to Novi Pazar, South West Serbia, Pirot, in the south, Zajecar, in the east and Sabac, in the west of the country.
- The floods that occurred in May 2014 imposed a massive evacuation of affected community members and mobilized thousands of professional teams and volunteers to their rescue. Within its capacities the Mission supported direct flood relief work. Additionally, once the emergency situation had ended, and as part of its larger efforts to advance gender-sensitive planning and mainstreaming, the Mission commissioned a baseline analysis to map the impact of floods from a gender perspective.
- The Mission assisted in organizing capacity-building trainings on disaster risk reduction in flood-prone areas located across the country. This culminated in the development and publication of a manual addressing the challenges posed by torrential floods and the value of inclusive flood risk management.
- In parallel, the Mission is also working on disaster preparedness itself. We have a long-standing programme with the Ministry of Interior's Sector for Emergency Management and local self-governments to enhance disaster preparedness and response at the local level.
- The highlight of this support is a series of emergency management simulation exercises, which include and cover municipalities from different parts of Serbia. Participants in these exercises, i.e. members of municipal emergency management headquarters, respond to a theoretical (but realistic) disaster scenario affecting their area and test their level of preparedness.
- Earlier this year, we supported the Ministry and the Sector in organising a "Lessons learned" workshop, which was aimed at assessing the relevance of the previous capacity development seminars at the local level from the perspective of the real challenges and disasters affecting Serbia in 2014.
- The cross-border nature of flooding offered an opportunity for co-operation among countries from the Western Balkan region, through a participatory approach. These events convened representatives from line ministries, emergency response units, public utility companies, local authorities, Aarhus centres and environmental CSOs, from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia.
- The participants gained an insight into international practices developed through partnerships between the administration and local communities but also of challenges faced by communities from the West Balkans, located in flood-prone areas.
- Looking at the ambitious agenda and the speakers' list before and ahead of me, I am confident that today's discussions will lead to new insights and approaches to the work of the Economic and Environmental Forum Process.
- Thank you for your attention.