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**OPTI\_ALERT – WP2**

***REPORT ON PREVIOUS EXPERIENCES WITH MASS MEDIA IN ALERTING SITUATIONS***

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

To understand the mechanism of communication during alerting situations, it is necessary a brief introduction about the organization of civil protection system in Italy and in Sicily.

The major natural disasters that have devastated our country have caused as social and political reaction the birth of a national system of civil protection, which gradually assumed the present appearance.

Our system was born and raised as a consequence of the hard and painful event of the Florence flood of 1966, the earthquake in Friuli (1976), in Irpinia (1980), in Umbria and Marche (1997), mudflows in Campania (1998), floods in northern Italy (2000), earthquake in Molise (2002) including the drama of a collapsed school in San Giuliano, until the recent emergencies of Giampileri (ME) and San Fratello (ME).

Each tragedy has been followed by structural adjustments and legislation adaptation to make more efficient the machinery of civil defense and its operations, taking into account the limitations, problems and specific features shown by subsequent emergencies.

Already in the 70s, mainly thanks to the intuition of Hon. Zamberletti, who is the founding father of the Italian Civil Protection, our country has made the choice not to create a "body" of civil defense, but to build a National Service. This Service consists in a system of coordination and distribution of responsibilities in the event of a disaster that is able to mobilize and direct all available resources such as Army, Fire Fighters, the Red Cross, organizations of volunteers of civil protection, network engineers and scientists who work with us on preventing disasters when possible and, during the events to ensure timely, effective interventions to cope with emergencies.

The Italian civil protection finds its final form by Law 225 of 1992, but even after that date the adjustment process is continued without interruption until the decisions taken in 2002 to assign the responsibility for civil protection directly to the Head of the Government in office, while the operational system of civil protection has increased to the maximum the capacity to forecast and prevent various types of risk.

The Italian model of civil protection is unique and is linked to the choice of not having, as in many countries, also European, a framework including all the resources required to cope with several kinds of events, but a complex system that sees the department engaged in a coordinating role through the use, if needed, of structures already available such as professionals who already work in the area, Fire, Military, Law Enforcement, the scientific community, medical professionals, engineers and operators in the world of Volunteering that can bring both their expertise but also solidarity, an added value very common in our country especially during emergencies.

From an environmental point of view Italy is among the most beautiful countries in the world and this is at the same time its beauty and its weakness. Forest fires,

hydrogeological and volcanic hazards, earthquakes etc. highlight the most important aspects of the problem.

In no other country in Europe are present as in our country almost all the environmental risks, all equally dangerous.

### **The importance of working in the prediction, prevention, training, information and culture.**

Each of these five activities could be subject of a specific in-depth examination. Civil protection is one of the youngest institutions of our country and the first obstacle it faced was to grapple with a difficult reality where implement an optimum but extremely complex design. Now the construction phase of the system can be defined successfully completed, each component knows what to do, how and when to intervene. We know, the Italians know, they can rely on professionals to handle any event with an entirely appropriate response capability.

The commitment, the challenge, already from some time, is the ability to deploy and implement all those initiatives useful for anticipating an "event".

The COA of Stromboli and the radar network in Catania are just two examples of prediction and prevention tools I could mention. To those I should add the most arduous of tasks: the acquisition by any individual citizen of awareness of their exposure to risks and the ability to participate as an active subject to mitigate its impacts.

The spread of the culture of individual and collective civil protection can only be achieved through training and information.

### **The evolution of the civil protection system and prospects for improvement.**

The most notable element of evolution is the idea of a civil protection intended as a resource to be triggered by the occurrence of an emergency to a Civil Protection strongly committed on the prediction and prevention of those events which may cause emergency situations. Technological advances and scientific research can now provide with more or less advance, according to the risk, the occurrence of critical situations. This allows us to alert the local and intervene more quickly if the forecast indicates a probable emergency situation.

With the usual exception of earthquakes that so far science has not found a way to predict.

The international missions have highlighted the fact that more and more local resources are not sufficient to cope with emergencies and require the commitment of the whole international community, due to the size of the event itself, or typically in developing countries, the help of the international community is often the only possible answer.

The need to develop a system capable of integrating the various "civil protection" optimizing interventions to avoid unnecessary and sometimes harmful duplications, to coordinate the different specializations to pursue the most effective interventions, is the challenge of this new millennium for a modern Civil Protection, for the Italian and for the others.

## **2. THE REGIONAL DEPARTMENT OF CIVIL PROTECTION – MAIN ACTIVITIES**

The Regional Department of Civil Protection (DRPC) was established in 2000, while the activities of the Service of Messina started on 1<sup>st</sup> February, 2002.

Almost a decade during which our office has experienced and participated in the most important and painful events in Sicily and Italy.

Institutional activities provided by law and in charge of DRPC are:

- Management and activation of the Integrated Regional Operating Room (h 24). Receives and evaluates reports of catastrophic events, activity of monitoring of events, retrieves and directs vehicles and equipment.
- Management of volunteers, management of the regional register of volunteer organizations, distribution, supply, supervision of the proper use and training of volunteers.
- Update and training of the staff of the Department and voluntary associations included within the Regional Register.
- Starting and operation of the new national system for weather warning and emergency management.
- Forecasting and prevention of seismic hazard, geological, fires, volcanic, promotion and planning support to provincial and municipal civil defense.
- Managing of post-disaster activities to recover to normal conditions.
- Implementation of public works for civil protection.
- Acquisition and management of materials and means of civil protection within the budget; the low allocations were insufficient to create even a small fleet of equipment and vehicles.
- Activities of forecasting and prevention of health risk, veterinary and anthropogenic; activities in support of disaster psychology.

### 3. RELATIONS WITH MASS MEDIA

Among all the carried out activities, the one regarding the relations with the mass media plays a central role and both the President of the Sicilian Region and the General Director of the Regional Civil Protection department have made much efforts on it.

Beyond the political motivation that fuels the interest in a successful collaboration with the media, there is also an interest as well as an institutional commitment to provide the right information to the people and institutions of the activities, roles and responsibilities, about handling of events, behaviors in the case of events, etc ...

Our department has always placed great importance on institutional communication, understanding the important role of this human activity both during crisis and normal conditions.

In fact, even if the two moments are substantially different, both involve the necessity of the Civil Defense to communicate with the external reference in a different manner but still maintaining an high level of such communication activity.

Over time the systems are changed, the contents, the media that our Department has pursued in times of crisis and peace.

Since the early commitments in states of crisis important the need to structure good communication has been perceived as very. Thus the issue has been addressed quite naturally, both for the importance of contents and for the need to "communicate" in a consistent way with the involved population the developments related to crisis management. The media relations have always been held by the Head of Department or by the President of Sicily Region, as Authority in charge for the Administration.

At the same time a primary objective was to root on the territory the activity in order to educate the population on how to behave in a crisis, what attitude to adopt, how to deal with the minutes immediately after the occurrence of a catastrophic event in which, inevitably, one is alone, how to get help and what to communicate to rescuers.

A big effort has been done on the development within the department of large a number of initiatives related to the transfer of knowledge between the Civil Protection and the population regarding the above mentioned activities.

From the combination of the described demands and needs, a central structure was set up whose main purpose was to build a network of connections in the territory to manage institutional communications and relations with the mass media.

The central structure with a director of operations at the headquarters of the Department of communication and contacts with the local branches of the services of local courts for the province, has identified two levels of relationship with the media:

- **Regional level:** where the relationships with the media are held by the General Director both during a crisis or normal conditions in order to transmit information and communications that have a regional character and which affect the whole district population. The central structure has the function of filtering and organization of press conferences.
- **Provincial level:** where the relationship with the media are kept by the Director of the Local Service both during a crisis or normal conditions in order to transmit information and communications that have a territorial nature which affect the local population of a part or the whole province. The Communication Referee with function of filtering, organization of press conferences and preparation of press releases.

This system has established a relationship of mutual admiration between the Administration and the media and has been very useful in order to timely raise awareness about the activities that the Department has put in place in different crisis and non-emergency conditions.

During crisis management, the local press was kept informed at regular intervals almost through SMS or e-mail sent at the central point of contact or communication. This involves the reduction of anxiety caused by the expectation of the news and the consequent loss of power on trusted communication.

For many years a video magazine was drafted whose contents were intended to inform professionals and the public on the activities of the department. The product was distributed to about 20-25 local and regional broadcasters, some of which satellite, which have included it in its schedule.

An important contribution to corporate communication in the event of a crisis and warning was given by our website which refers to security warnings concerning the activities of civil responsibility of the department containing thematic maps and the performance of procedural matters relating to the management of states of crisis.

The Department of Civil Protection of the Sicilian region has an Operating Room (Sorisi - Integrated Regional Operations Room Sicily) working 24 hours a day every day of the year. This structure also serves as hub for information and communications to and from the media during states of crisis.

The flow of information can be represented as follows:

- **Out:** when you turn a crisis all the players for any activity related to the crisis itself, relate, and relate their work to Sorisi using the information, as well as the main activity of co-ordination but to respond to requests for information received by the media.
- **Inland:** Sorisi to reach through mass media and news agencies in real-time updates on the ongoing situation. The information is turned over to the contact points to verify the need for targeted interventions and to update operators on the mutation of the situation.

#### **4. CRISIS MANAGEMENT**

From the point of view of information the management of a crisis or a warning requires particular attention in order to communicate the correct information.

The real effects of an event are known as time goes on, so we need to govern communication in a progressive way.

The media tend to have an immediate response, accurate and timely, even if you do not have reliable data.

It is therefore necessary to allow those who have the coordinating role to carry out the task to communicate both with the authorities and with the media.

Whenever an event occurs (which is a crisis or a warning) it requires the intervention of the "system of civil protection" and centers where decisions for the management of the event have to be established.

The system is organized according to operational centers models (Augustus Methodology) to help to manage the event at various levels of responsibility. Within these centers the "mass media and communication" is the catalyst of all the information about the event where all media channels (television, radio, newspapers, etc.) can get updates .

It is the only authorized official voice to give information responding to the following characteristics:

- Uniform
- Fixed
- Accurate

This function is conducted by individuals with vast experience and knowledge on the field previously identified in the plans of civil protection.

It is necessary that the information coming out of the crisis management centers are exactly calibrated so as not to cause too much concern but not too optimistic.

The Department's mission is therefore to provide the information by placing appropriate attention on the effects that the dissemination of information by the media on final destination: the population.

#### **The experiences gained from the service PC.**

The Service of Messina, in many local and national emergencies, has led to implement guidelines for information to population aiming at building confidence in the institution, as much as possible by customizing the information to people living in areas at risk with using straightforward, clear and simple language.



Over the past 10 years the Sicilian Region has been affected by numerous and various natural disasters that have affected the population, sparing none of the nine provinces.

Since 2000 to reach today, stand out in importance and the commitment required to the Civil Defense Regional events such as the earthquake that struck in September 2002 the city of Palermo, only after a month from another major calamity due to earthquakes and eruptions of Mount Etna that affected several municipalities in the slopes of the volcano and caused severe damage to infrastructure and housing and to forests.

It was not yet finished the event that a new emergency on Etna hits in Sicily. This time the protagonist was the archipelagos of the Aeolian Islands hit by a tsunami caused by the collapse of a slope of the submerged volcano Stromboli. It was 30 December 2002 and the event of interest, though with much less intensity, stroke a good part of the Tyrrhenian Sea including the southern coast of Calabria and Sicily.

Only a month later another event affected the western Tyrrhenian province of Messina hit by a major hydro-geological phenomenon.

Again in January 2004 strange electrical phenomena affected the town of Caronia, near Messina, in particular the village of Canneto which was evacuated for a long time.

In the summer of 2007, an event that has left its mark among the Sicilian population due to its severity was a large amount of fire fueled by strong sirocco wind that destroyed thousands of hectares of forest, infrastructure and production facilities. But even worse, seven people lost their lives because of the fire in the province of Messina.

From fire to water, at least in terms of time, the pace was very quick. In November and December of that year other important hydrogeological instability, caused by heavy rainfall, stroke the whole island and in particular the province of Messina's Ionian cities. The same phenomenon was repeated after one year with particular fury this time, on the Tyrrhenian coast from Messina and Aeolian archipelago.

But exactly a year after the most disaster-related landslide risk event appeared. On 1 October 2009, more than a rainfall event of exceptional importance, literally melts the surface layer of debris of several hills that insist on settlements of villages and towns of the Tyrrhenian coast of Messina. The runoff dragged downstream an enormous amount of debris that destroyed whatever meet on its own course. Thousands homeless, hundreds of homes and businesses destroyed, several kilometers of roads taken away from the mud along with other artifacts. Thirty-seven people were killed, including six never recovered, and hundreds injured.

The disaster was repeated a few months apart in the territory of Nebrodi in February 2010, also in the province of Messina, fortunately without human sacrifice, but with much damage to the urban fabric and infrastructure of small mountain towns.

Last reply, but the same script, in February-March of this year.

Meanwhile, already in December 2010 and without interruption, Sicily, and in particular the island of Lampedusa, jumped in the news for the flow of migrants from countries of North Africa affected by the recent amendments to the political and social structures.

The events listed are those which, as stated in the introduction, are more interested and committed to the regional civil protection system.

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