

Bridging the Inclusion Gap: Advancing Equality in European Civil Protection Teams

Civil Protection Forum – 5 June 2024

11:15 – 12:00

The panel discussed the issue of inclusion with an audience mostly composed of people having a link with the deployment of experts within the UCPM (2/3). The Moderator introduced the discussion by explaining the approach adopted for this event, stressing the need to understand the variety of realities lying behind the concept of “diversity” and the interest for an intersectional approach. The team organised three stepping-stone events in May, to involve as many experts as possible and keep a strength-based approach, instead of risking backlash by putting people on the defensive.

When asked about how she saw the importance of diversity among EUCPTs, Inger-Johanne Tjoflaat answered that it was the best way to support the different community served by the UCPM. Diversity allows to deliver better and theoretical research proved it. Diversity is a fact that should not be questioned. Inclusion and empowerment require a particular mindset and a will for action. It implicates to listen carefully to stakeholders and include them purposely. She also mentions the interest of taking the value out of diversity, by using the creativity stemming from diversity.

Antonella Cavallo questioned Ana Kosterkiewicz on how she felt empowered as a woman in her missions. She covered a variety of factors. Keeping gender-specific roles is impossible in her mind, even if the military environment surrounding some of her missions is mostly male-constituted. Regarding concrete experiences she had, she first mentioned her mission as a paramedic in Ukraine, where she was particularly worried about women’s place and safety but managed to keep up with a team that disregarded differences of gender. She then talked about her EUCPT deployment in Cairo, Egypt, when she felt very empowered, notably thanks to a good team composition, a proper will to see her coming, and colleagues showing support and appreciation.

Geir Ellingsen first took time to present the current state of play in the UCPM, with mostly male-dominated Civil Protection organisations across Europe and acknowledged that he was part of them. Being part of a majority comes with privileges, such as not being put into question by others on his motivation and capacity. People rather tend to trust and see him as skilful because he is a man and is white, rather than because of his experience and achievements. The conscript system is also an interesting way of recruiting, as it is not based on motivation but on a unilateral choice from the authorities. There is thus a strong potential to increase diversity within Civil Protection authorities, which has been done in Norway in the last 2-4 years regarding female staff (from 16 to 45 per cent). The benefits of increasing diversity in the field are incredible and positively affect performance, abilities, and the service to communities. There is a need to adopt a holistic perspective to make the magic happen, by going beyond gender, race, backgrounds, hard and soft skills. The complexity of challenges faced at the EU level, such as climate change and complex conflicts, is such that diversity is needed in the workforce and mindsets.

Michela Matuella addressed the abilities of the EU institutions to act in this direction, through the point of view of the ERCC. Joint work with national authorities is necessary and should be done following a bottom-up approach, by listening to actors such EUCPT members or Liaison officers and then see what works. She listed a few examples of how this approach can then be translated into work. Even if rapidity is sometimes an obstacle to ensure diversity among deployed teams, the ERCC does its best to do so, especially since it improves the quality of work and the plurality of ideas. Concerning

Liaison Officers, the ERCC always try to staff a younger member along a more experienced one, so the first learns from the second but also provides fresh input. DG ECHO can do better, by strengthening the preparation of colleagues being deployed, talk further with trainers and creating the right conditions to do so. On the latter note, there is a possibility to obtain results by creating a safe place and environment for trainings and deployments to take place in a more diverse approach. Pre-deployment briefings, Terms of references and codes of conducts can also be amended and monitored. Follow-up will then have to be done, especially when problematic events happen. The topic needs to be further streamlined in every stage of the ERCC's work and this session is part of this listening effort.

Inger-Johanne Tjoflaat added then that diversity and merits are not mutually exclusive and pointed an unconscious bias in the habit of always questioning the competence of a person that could be selected under a diversity-led approach. This question is notably raised when ensuring that women are more represented in a male-led system. Antonella Cavallo wondered whether it could be because of a vicious cycle, due to a lack of trained people.

Michela Matuella also addressed the issue of the perception men can have of women, as Antonella Cavallo questioned her to see if it would be useful to tell boys to listen further to girls. She considers that merely ensuring the presence of women in an organisation is not enough. There are indeed many women in management position in the institutions, but this needs to be complemented by a broad change of approach and mindset. There are instruments at hands that can be pushed in a certain direction. Among capacities available, there is the possibility to work with Member and Participating States, contractors, as well as to update Terms of reference, implement joint approaches and set new standards.

Antonella Cavallo focused then on training and asked for ideas on the content of training and the willingness of cooperation from MS/PS. Michela Matuella acknowledged that there was a need to do more but that there was also a general willingness already present in the discussions on trainings and on contracts.

Antonella Cavallo asked Geir Ellingsen whether the work for diversity should be less one-sided. He considered that there was a need to adopt an approach based on an ecosystem, a common culture, that goes beyond pure mindset and skills. Similar minds should connect, agree, define and develop an internal culture that goes across all missions and endeavours. Missions should adjust to each and everyone, not just provide a list of DOs and DON'Ts. In general, there is no will of hurting but an issue of different culture towards a certain behaviour. As a Team Leader, one is in charge of a safe environment where people can speak up and are expected to listen. Antonella Cavallo adds that this safe space should exist before and after the conflict. Geir affirms that Team Leaders should adopt a diverse focus as soon as they start building the team, be more curious and explore personalities. When a misbehaviour happens, it remains to be seen if it is ill-intended or not. In the first case, this is unacceptable and, based on the agreement of service, sanctions should be taken without empathy. In the second case, the most frequent one, it should be fine to resolve with empathy and by talking about how behaviours affect one and another.

Anna Kosterkiewicz then shaped what a new, more diverse world should look like. She argued that imperfections and diversity of personalities should be accepted, as well as understanding others' needs. Team Leaders are important indeed, but members also have a role to play and must work on themselves and participate to report misbehaviours, difficulties and stop them. This can be seen as a peacebuilding exercise at a personal level, which may have cascade effects on the whole world.

Gordon Rattray from the EU Disability Forum asked the panel what was being done to ensure the training and recruitment of persons with disabilities, as they represent a huge share of the population (16 per cent according to him, EUROSTAT estimates it at 27 per cent in 2022). Michela Matuella referred to the fact that diversity was general and that such question showed that it was a problem to be too focused on specific aspects such as gender. She concludes that there is still a lot to do. Geir Ellingsen considers that awareness is being raised further on this point, as evacuation and coordination teams exercise now to evacuate young people with incompatibilities for example. This is not enough, however.

Another question was asked to the EU Commission to see how its members avoided a mechanical approach to diversity and covered other dimensions as well, such as the class system in which recruitment takes place or other relations of power. While the Commission is not responsible for Member States' recruitment, it can be definitely taken into consideration said Michela Matuella. Inger-Johanne Tjoflaat added that having now Brussels on board, which was a first, was definitely an asset to point the issue to Member and participating States and influence their policies. Michela Matuella stressed the responsibility of individuals in the system and ensure that they had to capture the nuances of diversity to avoid mechanical reactions.

A member of the Irish Civil Protection Authority insisted on the fact that the shift could also come thanks to the wider range of professions needed in the field, as traditional military profiles were now being complemented with hydrologists, scientists, medics, etc. This is not about replacing the culture of fire brigades and military, as it focuses at delivering and making things happen, but rather about reinforcing this potential with other added values. Inger-Johanne Tjoflaat pointed the interesting issues of mixing humanitarian and civil protection experiences for example. Stepping away from the usual military chain of command thinking is useful, as there is a need to focus more on the contribution of each and everyone rather than just relying on a strong Team Leader.

Grega Grobovsek, from the ERCC, asked what could be done on positive discrimination. He was answered that there was already a clear policy on that, but the question was more about how we can more forcefully apply it in the context of our work. This was part of the workshop events, discussing notably if we should enforce quotas and conduct more studies on how the community of civil protection is shaped. The question is to assess to which point one wants to push for a change. For quotas, the moment is not necessarily right, but other things can be done before, such as encouragement, leverage, diversification, etc. Antonella Cavallo also adds that the fact of being seen as protected species was not necessarily a good thing, as regards to quotas.

Anna Kosterkiewicz also provided advice for people from underrepresented groups being in future trainings or deployments. She insisted on the need to ensure cooperation, communicate about their needs and not be afraid to talk. Avoid putting pressure on yourself, as well as keeping reasonable expectations on others. If you are part of the UCPM, it already means that you are worth it and that your skills have been recognised as valuable. Express what your needs are and understand how everyone is shaped differently. She illustrated this last point by stating that she had been less afraid of being in Ukraine close to frontlines than to take a plane to fly to Cairo.

On a last question on statistics in the UCPM, notably for participants to trainings. The ERCC keeps a few statistics, on gender for example, but the data remain very limited./.