

Governing the Floods: Bosnia and Herzegovina

INTRODUCTION

The spring of 2014 was exceptionally wet and rainy in Southeast Europe with extreme rainfall recorded in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) from May 13–17, surpassing all measurements of the previous 120 years and any modeled predictions. The resulting runoff made the complex hydrology of the Bosna River apparent and the speed, magnitude and duration of the flood was not anticipated. As it unfolded there was no time to react appropriately. The flood grew into a so-called “black swan”, an unpredictable and unexpected event of catastrophic magnitude. Even though severe flooding was unavoidable, crisis mitigation and preparedness across BiH were clearly deficient or lacking. Many lives could have been saved and damages reduced with proper flood management.

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PROBLEM 1:

Lack of coordination and communication between BiH institutions in a multi-level, decentralized political system

Competences for crisis mitigation, preparedness, response and rescue operations, and recovery are shared among institutions and agencies on all levels of government. Responsibilities are not always clearly defined and there is both overlap as well as lack of governing authority. In addition, administrative boundaries do not take into account the hydrological configuration of the country, resulting in river basins managed under different legislations. This by itself is not an impediment to crisis response but requires complex multilevel coordination during crisis.

Lacking or insufficient coordination among BiH institutions results from inconsistent communication protocols and deficient information sharing. Especially in Republika Srpska (RS) there was a failure to communicate between institutions across entity lines. River levels of the Bosna in the Federation of BiH (FBiH) were not studied with diligence. For political reasons the early warning systems of FBiH and RS are not directly connected, a problem that still persists. While a coordinative body for emergency situations exists within the state-level Ministry of Security, it has been unable to meet once and discuss statewide coordination strategies. The lack of institutional coordination and communication is a persistent liability to BiH citizens and political contempt for reform is no longer acceptable.

MEASURES 1:

- The BiH Ministry of Security needs to ensure the functioning of the department for coordination within the Sector for Protection and Rescue. A yearly work plan needs to be defined and adequately financed.
- The entity civil protection departments (FBiH & RS) needs to employ or designate one civil servant responsible for coordination with the structures in the corresponding other entity and District Brčko. A yearly work plan must be defined and results evaluated.
- The FBiH Civil Protection Department needs to designate one civil servant responsible for directly communicating with the cantonal governments and cantonal civil protection departments. A yearly work plan must be defined and results evaluated.
- The three water management agencies (WMA) need to designate one employee responsible solely for coordination with other WMA's in BiH.
- The above named coordinators on all levels must be involved in coordination activities implemented by the BiH Ministry of Security.
- The WMA's need to work on linking the river management systems of BiH into one single electronic system that is co-managed and co-shared by all three WMA's.
- The BiH Council of Ministers and the BiH Presidency need to adopt a streamlined procedure for deploying BiH Armed Forces in cases of natural disasters and relief operations.
- The BiH Council of Ministers and entity governments in FBiH and RS need to adopt communication and information sharing protocols to enhance crisis preparedness and crisis response.
- The BiH Council of Ministers and entity governments in FBiH and RS need to facilitate the signing of cooperation agreements between all BiH response institutions and facilitate joint exercises.
- The EU and other international donors need to offer support and financial assistance dependent on better inter-entity coordination and cooperation.

PROBLEM 2:

Inadequate crisis preparedness and lack of equipment

Crisis mitigation and preparedness was low in 2014 across BiH. There was systemic disregard for flood management and crisis response in the past 25 years in terms of infrastructure, training, equipment and public education. The system established under socialist Yugoslavia was not updated nor adequately maintained, and its practical value to society minimized. Flood defenses and risk scenarios were inconsistent and planned for a 100-year maximum flood, far below the levels of 2014. Severe upstream flooding from the Bosna River was not even expected.

MEASURES 2:

- All government institutions need to maintain the renewed public and institutional interest for strengthening crisis mitigation.
- WMAs and other institutions need to continue investment in flood monitoring and mitigation infrastructure (embankments, channel dredging, pumping stations).
- All levels of government need to draft and/or update risk assessment and crisis response plans aiming to anticipate extreme weather phenomena and include a broader and more diverse range of response actors and units. These assessments and plans need to be made public, shared widely, and compared on a more systemic level (entity–country–SEE region).
- Entity governments need to undertake a more thorough and precise assessment of all local (municipal) capacities to deal with floods. In addition they need to make mid-term plans to provide proper essential equipment to local units, especially in underfinanced municipalities. Distribution procedures for more complex equipment in times of need must stress swift response due to flash flooding danger.
- The entity and cantonal governments should invest more in raising public awareness of floods and other risk factors, especially in schools.

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PROBLEM 3:

Clientelistic governance as a systemic factor leading to institutional neglect

Underlying cause of the previous two problems can be found in a clientelistic form of governance that leads to institutional neglect. This implies diverting significant resources away from public goods institutions into closed private interests. As a systemic problem it needs to be addressed long-term and taking into account a broader policy area than crisis management.

MEASURES 3:

- All public institutions (both government and public enterprise) need to implement more transparent procedures in regard to public procurement, employment practices and budgeting. These procedures should follow best international practices.
- Citizen associations need to be more diligent in oversight of public spending.
- All BiH judicial institutions (courts, prosecutors) need to build capacity to deal with corruption, embezzlement, malfeasance, nepotism, cronyism, patronage and other white-collar crime. Convictions need to be upheld more frequently.
- The EU and other international donors should show more trust in local political and judicial institutions, but at the same time perform diligent oversight and press for personal/individual charges in case of wrongdoing and embezzlement. This practice can strengthen local capacities instead of evading them.