

EMERGENCY HEADQUARTER'S „TABLE TOP” EXERCISES IN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

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Abstract: Emergency management requires teamwork within the structures that manage responses to them. In order to achieve that teamwork, it takes a lot of time, joint work, and good mutual knowledge of staff members. This implies the need for joint training in procedures, activities, exchange of information, etc. Preparations for exercises often take a lot of time, and the implementation itself is long and complex. In addition, there are other reasons for not implementing exercises and training, and most often it is money, which is lacking for this type of activity at the level of local self-government units. All this leads to the fact that local self-government units avoid carrying out exercises of protection and rescue forces. This work should show that "table top" exercises are an ideal tool for training staff for emergency situations at the level of local self-government units and that they enable team building and staff cohesion, which is of great importance in emergency situations. Moreover, only goodwill is needed to prepare, organize and implement this type of exercise.

Key words: „table top” exercises, local governments, headquarters, emergency, training

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2022, the Emergency Event Database - EMDAT recorded 387 natural hazards and disasters worldwide, resulting in the loss of 30,704 lives and affecting 185 million individuals. Economic losses totaled around 223.8 billion US\$. (EMDAT, 2023) It shows that natural hazards represent a great challenge for all countries of the world.

The listed data show that the threat from natural or other dangers is constant and that it is necessary for the training and qualification process to be constant, which ensures the complete and accurate execution of tasks. Civil protection as the bearer of the protection and rescue system to emergency situations, in order to function effectively and perform its functional tasks, must be supported by an effective process of training. Training is one of the key factors in good emergency response preparedness.

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Regarding training, Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction proposes improving the knowledge of services at all levels, civil society, community, and volunteers, as well as the private sector, by sharing experiences, lessons learned, good practices, and training and education on disaster risk reduction, implementing the application of existing training and education mechanisms. According to that the members of the protection and rescue system are trained through courses, seminars, trainings, and exercises. These activities provide an opportunity to test the system, identify deficiencies and improve efficiency in responding to crises.

One of the best tools to prepare people for response in case of natural or other disasters is different kinds of exercises. The exercises are practical activities to improve your skills. It is that kind of training where is possible to train individuals, units, and headquarters to perform practical activities in the case of natural disasters. Also, the exercises can be used for:

- testing and verification of policies, plans, procedures, training, equipment, interagency agreements,
- clarification and training of staff for certain roles and responsibilities,
- improving coordination and communication between agencies,
- improvement of individual performance,
- identifying gaps in resources and
- identifying areas for improvement (FEMA, 2020).

In general, exercises can be divided in order of increasing organizational intensity and investment into:

- Discussion or seminar platforms designed to provide information on procedures and organizational plans.
- “Table-top” exercises (TTX) are designed to engage participants in real situations to understand and imagine the application of procedures.
- Command post exercises that typically involve lead communication and coordination personnel in simulated incidents conducted in actual command post facilities.
- Live field exercises that allow organizations to test responses in real-world situations (Prior & Roth, 2016).

This paper will try to show, that TTX, is an ideal tool for training civil protection headquarter staff for emergency situations at the level of local self-government units. Also, TTX enables team building and staff cohesion, which is of great importance in emergency situations, and on the other hand, only goodwill is needed to prepare, organize and implement this type of exercise. Moreover, there will be shown that BiH civil protection institutions, and in this work especially civil protection elements in towns of BiH, do not use enough or at all those TTX to improve their capability.

2. TRAINING OF CIVIL PROTECTION IN BiH

The protection and rescue system in BiH is organized so that its holders are the entities (Republic of Srpska and Federation of BiH), and the state level of BiH has the role of coordinator, and therefore the activities in the field of training in the field of protection and rescue have certain specificities. In order to manage this coordination at the BiH level, the Department for Protection and Rescue was formed within the Ministry of Security of BiH.

In accordance with the Framework Law on Protection and Rescue, the training of protection and rescue forces is exclusively under the jurisdiction of the entities. (Official Gazette BiH, No 50/08) In article 14 of the same Law, the Ministry of Security "in cooperation with entity administrations of civil protection", and not independently, organizes, among other things, exercises of international importance, that is, entities and Brcko District BiH are independent in terms of training and exercises of their own protection and rescue forces.

From 2019 until 2022, the "Manual for Planning, execution, and evaluation of protection and rescue exercises in Bosnia and Herzegovina" was developed. The purpose of this manual is to define a unique methodology for planning and implementing exercises, from the level of the local community to the level of state institutions, as well as for exercises with different numbers of participants. The entities and Brcko District BiH accepted to use this manual.

After the big floods of 2014 in BiH, the analysis showed that in BiH it is necessary to further develop protection and rescue systems with the assurance of continuous training and certification of individuals and organizations for planned and coordinated action in case of natural disasters.

Likewise, the general conclusions and recommendations of the Regional Conference "Floods in Southeastern Europe - lessons learned and further steps", regarding the floods of 2014 in BiH, state that training facilities of the highest standards do not exist in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the existing capacities do not meet the required criteria. (Floods in Southeastern Europe, 2014) Also, the report from the NATO EADRCC exercise "Bosnia and Herzegovina 2017" clearly shows the shortcomings in the training of the protection and rescue forces. (EADRCC, ²⁰¹⁷)

In the Republic of Srpska, the legal framework exists, but it has not been fully implemented for eleven years. The training system of protection and rescue forces is aimed at specialist units at the level of the Republic Administration for Civil Protection through various foreign projects while training at the level of local self-government units is left to them, and also there is no quality analysis and financial support for exercises at all levels.

Moreover, in the Federation of Bosnia and Hercegovina, in accordance with the "The Development program for the protection and rescue of people and material goods from natural and other disasters in FBiH from 2021-2028.", the current situation in the field of planning and execution of most forms of training is based on an *ad hoc* system on all levels from Federation over Cantons to local communities (FUCZ, 2021).

3. TABLE-TOP EXERCISE

TTX is used as a type of exercise in many organizations. All members of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council use the same Guidelines for planning, conducting, and assessment of international exercises where the TTX is one of the exercises. (EAPC(SCEPC)N(2009)0032-REV1, 2009) The Russians do not recognize TTX but they have exercises for training of personnel and they are similar to TTX (Методические, 2021). The last manual that was adopted at the BiH level in 2022, "Manual for planning, execution, and evaluation of protection and rescue exercises in Bosnia and Herzegovina" also foresees TTX (Prirucnik, 2022).

TTX is an exercise based on discussions and is one of the simplest types of exercises to implement. It is usually carried out indoors using office spaces where people work or which are provided for the purposes of the exercise. Conference or sports halls can be used for this type of exercise, depending on the size of the exercise and the number of engaged participants. Since these exercises do not involve the deployment of personnel and equipment on the field

and since there is no need for any special spatial capacities, these exercises are a flexible and economical way of training and exercise for civil protection headquarters.

These exercises are a cost-effective way of training in leadership and decision-making procedures in the context of emergency preparedness, which allows for avoiding some of the challenges of planning exercises in the field with real forces. In these exercises around the table, one tries to use real possible situations, which are used to start a discussion, check the procedures, start a discussion about the regulations, or draw a lesson and the best approach and way of acting in given situations. Moderators of exercise are responsible for presenting the problem, moderating the discussion, and sticking to the schedule.

The participants in TTX are decision-makers, planners, and managers, that is, leaders of certain units that participate in protection and rescue. These are exercises of headquarters not units.

According to some researchers there are some advantages and disadvantages of TTX.

- Requires only a modest commitment in terms of time, cost, and resources.
- Is an effective method for reviewing plans, procedures, and policies.
- Is a good way to familiarize key personnel with their roles and responsibilities.
- Is an opportunity to build trust (team building).
- It stimulates thought processes.
- Helps focus the team within a specific situation (scenarios such as cyber)
- Helps identify any issues, challenges and / or assumptions.
- Helps identify resources necessary to overcome any issues, challenges and / or assumptions.
- Helps identify means of overcoming any identified issues, challenges and / or assumptions.
- An opportunity for leaders to practice their crisis management leadership skills. (Burton, 2020)

Also, the TTX are performed in a safe learning environment where participants can apply the theory of their policies and procedures to ensure they are fit for purposes..

Some of disadvantages of TTX are:

- Lacks realism and thus does not provide a true test of a crisis, emergency, security or business continuity management system's capabilities.
- Provides only a superficial exercise of plans, procedures, and team capabilities.
- Does not provide a practical way to demonstrate system overload. (Burton, 2020)

However, if the TTX is poorly prepared and managed or unchallenging then the participants may get a false sense of readiness.

4. METODOLOGY

For the purpose of this research, a simply questioner was constructed and delivered to 33 towns (they have the status of the town) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in order to get answers from them. An e-mail with questioner consisted also explanation, what TTX is, and how supposed to be executed, and all in order to make it easier for the responders. The questions were:

1. Have you implemented "table-top" exercises for the training of the Headquarters for emergency situations so far?
2. If yes, how many times in the last five years?
3. If yes, who prepared, organized, and executed that exercise?
4. How do you rate this type of exercise? Excellent, very good, good, bad
5. The reason why you think that these types of exercises deserve that rating? (Please explain in a few sentences!)

Moreover, the questionnaire was a very simple one, in order to avoid a problem collecting information, and depending on my previous experiences in working with civil protection in the local communities.

This questionnaire was sent by an e-mail to civil protection offices in the town's administration, if an e-mail address was available, and where it was not case e-mail was sent to the mayor's office or to some other addresses in the administration of the towns.

The results of this questionnaire were analyzed and some conclusions were driven from it.

5. DISCUSSION

At the beginning of this discussion is necessary to highlight that the questionnaire for this research was repeated twice in two months and just nine replies were received. It showed that local communities are not professional, or they are not willing to participate in this research. Simply there was not any reply from 24 towns. Also in that context, it is important to highlight that in those towns, that were contacted, just in twelve towns there was an e-mail for civil protection. In eleven towns e-mails were available only for the town's administration and in ten cases e-mails were personalized.

Towns were chosen to get questionnaires because of their complexity, population, and challenges that they have when it comes to natural or other hazards. The civil protection organization is supposed to be on a higher level, than in small municipalities. The Headquarters of civil protection at the town level is supposed to be complex, with a lot of members and different organizations, IOs, or NGOs, too. For them, TTX is a tool that they are supposed to use very often in their training.

In the end, the answers were got from six towns in Federation BiH (Lukavac, Gradacac, Mostar, Orasje, Sarajevo, Srebrenik) and from three towns in the Republic of Srpska (Gradiska, Prijedor, Banja Luka). Taking into consideration that there were just nine answers the analysis was conducted for each of them.

An interesting answer has come from Town Sarajevo in Federation BiH. According to the answer, in the Statute of the Sarajevo Town civil protection is not in the scope of work. It is the reason why they did not conduct TTX up to now. It is a quite strange answer and situation that a town with 400.000 inhabitants does not have civil protection in the scope of the work.

Also, the Town of Mostar responded that they did not have TTX up to now but they had civil emergencies, and the "headquarters of civil protection was performing well." Because of that, the people from Mostar's civil protection think that they do not need TTX training for Civil Protection Headquarters.

Banja Luka, as the biggest town in the Republic of Srpska, in the last ten years organized one TTX as part of the UNDP project. Members of the UNDP team prepared, organized, and realized the exercise, and in town civil protection graded it as "good" but they recognized the

importance of those TTXs and they thought that TTX should be in the civil protection plans regularly. The main reasons why the TTX is not now in plans are the “unwillingness of decision-makers and members of staff to be trained and qualified for emergency management, decision-making, and group decision-making. Another reason for not holding such exercises is the absence of supervision over the work of the headquarters.”

Prijedor's civil protection also did not have TTX but they answered that members of Civil Protection Headquarters should have TTX. The main reasons why it is not the case are the will to prepare, organize and conduct TTX, finances at the local community, and Law on civil protection should be revised.

The civil protection from Gradiska town also did not have TTX up to now and explanation is: "The reason for not holding the training is multi-layered and difficult to explain".

The Town Gradacac civil protection answered that they did not have TTX in the last five years but there was TTX 15 years ago, and Federal Administration for Civil Protection organized and conducted that TTX. The general attitude is that all exercises are useful and should be applied continuously.

Lukavac's civil protection also did not have TTX up to now and the reason for that is "insufficient interest or lack of information".

6. CONCLUSION

As was shown earlier, continuous education and training for all stakeholders of civil protection are vital to improving skills, knowledge, and emergency management capabilities. However, according to the answers to the questionnaire, it is quite clear that TTXs are not on the list of activities in the civil protection local community's plans. All nine towns that answered the questionnaire responded that they did not have TTX in the last five years. Some representatives of civil protection in towns were interested in TTX, and they had a positive attitude toward those exercises.

The main reasons why those TTX were not conducted were different but can be presented through “insufficient interest or lack of information”.

TTXs should be better presented to local communities because they are simple, not long-lasting, and cheap way of training. All those advantages of TTX can be used to improve the protection and rescue system on all levels of civil protection in BiH, especially at the local level.

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