

# DISASTER RISK REDUCTION STRATEGIES: A CASE STUDY OF THE MUNICIPALITY OF SAMAC

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**Abstract:** *This study examines the implementation and impact of the Project for Increasing Resilience to Natural Disasters and Enhancing Preparedness Strategy (PREPS) in the Municipality of Samac, focusing on the response to the challenges of natural disaster management, particularly in the aftermath of the 2014 floods. Implemented in partnership with the humanitarian organization Catholic Relief Services (CRS), the project aimed to rebuild critical infrastructure and strengthen local capacities for disaster risk reduction (DRR). Core objectives included enhancing the institutional and technical capabilities of local civil protection services, developing comprehensive emergency action plans, and increasing public awareness through targeted training and simulation exercises. The study employs a qualitative methodological approach, with expert interviews as the primary data collection tool. An in-depth interview was conducted with a municipal official from Samac who was directly involved in the planning and execution of the project. The findings underscore the importance of planning, capacity building, and cross-sector collaboration in enhancing community resilience to natural disasters.*

**Key words:** Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR), Community Resilience, Emergency Preparedness, PREPS Project, Samac

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Reasons for launching the project “Strengthening Resilience to Natural Disasters and Improving Preparedness Strategies – PREPS” were initiated in 2014 as a response to the catastrophic floods in the Balkan region. In May 2014, Serbia experienced devastating floods, causing widespread damage to homes, infrastructure, and disrupted social fabric. Faith-based organizations, including Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and Philanthropy, (Serbian: Човекољубље), a charitable foundation of the Serbian Orthodox Church responded swiftly to the disaster. In the initial phase, CRS provided cash assistance, while Philanthropy used its church network to reach out to those affected (CRS, 2014). Catholic Relief Services also provided full support in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Traditional religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina played a significant role in the response to the 2014 floods. However, their participation was neglected by national and local authorities (Jurisic & Marceta, 2024). Over time, the project has developed into a long-term initiative to strengthen the capacity of local communities to reduce disaster risks and respond to crises. Same actors run the project “Strengthening Resilience to Natural Disasters and Improving Preparedness Strategies” (PREPS) (Човекољубље, 2018; Caritas Srbije, 2024). It was initiated to address the increasing frequency and severity of natural disasters in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, seeks to empower local communities through enhanced capacity and preparedness. The project is funded by the United States Agency for International

Development (USAID), implemented in Bosnia and Herzegovina by CRS (Catholic Relief Services), and in Serbia by Philanthropy and Caritas Serbia. These organizations collaborate with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), which provides crucial funding and support, enabling the project to address the pressing needs of communities at risk (Човекољубље, 2018; Caritas Srbije, 2024).

Catholic Relief Services incorporate Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) standards into all their development and post-developmental programs so that communities and families are able to avert, respond to and recover from both natural and human-induced disasters. Much concentration on vulnerable communities where floods, droughts, and storms happen so that CRS can work on risk identification and developing early warnings and evacuation plans and livelihood protections. The working interest of CRS is situated within the context of the PREPS projects; therefore, community action refers to a citizen-oriented approach in which resilience-building involves participation from citizens, local institutions, and economic actors (CRS, 2024). The first phase (PREPS I) covered eight municipalities in Serbia: Cacak, Ivanjica, Trstenik, Aleksandrovac, Kraljevo, Krupanj, Lucani and Mionica, as well as six in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Doboj, Domaljevac-Samac, Jablanica, Samac, Zavidovici and Zepce. The second phase (PREPS II) covers 10 municipalities in Serbia: Cacak, Ivanjica, Trstenik, Aleksandrovac, Krusevac, Cicevac, Varvarin, Prokuplje, Kraljevo, and Mionica, as well as 6 in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Doboj, Konjic, Jablanica, Kladanj, Sekovici, and Celic. The project illustrates the significant role of religious and civil society organizations in disaster management, through cooperation with state institutions and local governments, with the aim of building a sustainable and efficient system of responding to natural disasters. Key activities include training local authorities, formation of civil protection units, simulations, development of regulations, distribution of educational materials, and awarding grants. Project partners in Bosnia and Herzegovina are the Ministry of Security (Protection and Rescue Sector), the Federal and Cantonal Civil Protection Administration, the Republic Civil Protection Administration of Republic of Srpska, the Federal Hydrometeorological Institute of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Hydrometeorological Institute of Republic of Srpska, municipal civil protection units, and NGOs, including the Red Cross Society of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Човекољубље, 2018; Caritas Srbije, 2024). Philanthropy in Serbia implements its humanitarian programs in cooperation with state institutions and actors, such as the Emergency Situations Sector of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, local governments, and other relevant entities (Човекољубље, 2018). This cooperation enables more efficient management of natural disaster risks and capacity building of local and national institutions. Joint trainings on disaster risk reduction have been implemented in cooperation with organizations such as Serbia Forests, Serbia Waters, and the Hydrometeorological Institute of Serbia (Човекољубље, 2018; Caritas Srbije, 2024).

The aim of this research is to evaluate the implementation and outcomes of the PREPS Project in Samac Municipality in order to generate evidence-based recommendations for the development of a comprehensive local disaster risk reduction strategy, with a focus on strengthening institutional capacities, emergency planning, and community engagement. The results of the findings can be used to inform the creation of a comprehensive local disaster risk reduction strategy, providing evidence-based insights into effective planning, capacity building, and community engagement practices that enhance resilience to future natural disasters.

This paper is structured into five main parts. It begins with an introduction that outlines the research context and objectives and continues with literary review in the second part. The third part presents the materials and methods, detailing the qualitative approach based on expert interviews. The fourth part outlines the research findings, drawn from an expert

interview with a municipal official from Samac involved in the PREPS Project, as well as a discussion of the results in relation to disaster preparedness and resilience, while the conclusion is given at the end.

## **2. LITERARY REVIEW**

International activities aimed at disaster risk reduction have intensified significantly since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in response to the increasing threat of natural disasters. These disasters, which directly threaten human life, health, material assets and the environment, have triggered the need to establish an international framework for action to reduce risk. The UN General Assembly declared the 1990s as the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, which launched global efforts in this direction. International regulation, over time, has included a number of strategic documents, such as: the Yokohama Strategy (1994), the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (1999), the Millennium Declaration (2000), the Hyogo Framework for Action (2005–2015), the Sendai Framework for Action (2015–2030), and the 2030 Agenda for Global Development (United Nations, 2015) with 17 Sustainable Development Goals. At the heart of all these initiatives is the coordinated reduction of disaster risk, increasing resilience and integrating prevention into sustainable development. Global efforts aimed at disaster risk reduction represent a coordinated and integrated approach that involves different actors - states, international organizations, civil society and the private sector.

Despite growing concern in academic and policy circles, one important area of discourse has remained largely underexplored – the role of religion in understanding and addressing natural disasters (Chester, 1998). Global attention has been paid to disaster risk reduction, but theological reflection on this issue has been conspicuously absent, as theologians have largely remained absent from the growing global conversation about natural disasters (Chester, 1998). The lack of scholarly attention to the study of religion in the context of disasters is a significant oversight, given the profound influence that religious beliefs have on people's behavior when faced with natural hazards (Gaillard & Texier, 2010). Despite limited scholarly attention to the intersection of religion and disaster, religious institutions and organizations are deeply embedded in local communities and enjoy a high level of trust, enabling them to respond quickly and effectively in times of crisis. In recent years, the role of religion in disaster management has received more attention, as it has been recognized as a significant socio-cultural factor that influences human behavior and disaster response (McGeehan, & Baker, 2016; Ballano, 2022).

Religion is not just fixed ideas and rituals but the deeply entrenched social matrix within which our identity, culture, art, politics, and social relationships have been shaped throughout history (Марчета, 2025). Depending on the generation and social condition, it could promote the liberation of the masses, or, in fact, it could be used against them. This control can still be exercised today with respect to people's values, norms, and behavior. The dual role of religion is found in one of its functions: imposing social control or offering pathways to personal freedom. In the light of natural disasters, however, religious communities and institutions are increasingly considered actors in the response and recovery phases (Марчета, 2025). In times of crises, they provide assistance and support to vulnerable populations, thereby proving that they are incorporated within the community and are able to operate in emergency situations. Regardless of their origins, affiliations, or specific focuses, traditional religious organizations are united by a shared commitment to humanitarian values and easing suffering (Jurisic & Marceta, 2024). Their active involvement not only strengthens community resilience but also supports broader initiatives in social justice and humanitarian relief.

In a review of the literature on the relationship between religion and disaster, Sun, Deng, and Qi identify two important pathways of influence: the disaster awareness pathway and the religious support pathway (Sun, Deng, & Qi, 2017, 2018). Cultural beliefs and social practices rooted in religion remain strong, significantly influencing the geography and scale of risk for populations living in disaster-prone areas. Sun and Deng (2018) examined the complex interplay between religion, risk perception, and disaster response, emphasizing how religious beliefs, customs, and practices influence the ways individuals and communities cope with disaster risks. People of different religions share an ideological line that events labeled as natural disasters are in fact socially constructed and attributed to natural forces or deities. There is no consensus in the literature on the nature of this relationship, and different theories emphasize both the positive and potentially negative roles of religion in disaster preparedness and recovery. (Sun, Deng, & Qi, 2017, 2018).

### **3. METODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study adopts a qualitative methodological approach, chosen for its suitability in exploring complex processes and gaining in-depth insights into the implementation and impact of the PREPS project in Samac Municipality. The primary data collection tool employed was an expert interview, enabling the researcher to gather detailed, experience-based information directly from a key stakeholder involved in the project.

An in-depth interview was conducted on March 17, 2025, with a municipal official from Samac who played a direct and active role in the planning, coordination, and execution of the PREPS initiatives. This participant provided valuable perspectives on institutional response mechanisms, the effectiveness of implemented measures, and the broader implications for disaster preparedness and resilience-building.

The interview was structured around a set of nine open-ended questions, designed to guide the conversation while allowing flexibility for elaboration. The thematic areas covered were:

1. Introduction to the PREPS project and their implementation
2. Field-level activities and operationalization of the initiatives
3. Citizen engagement and participation
4. Collaboration with local and regional partners
5. Challenges and specific contextual factors
6. Evaluation and monitoring of project progress
7. Cooperation with international and faith-based organizations
8. Future plans and expectations through 2030
9. Recommendations and concluding reflections

The data gathered through this qualitative approach provided rich, contextualized insights into both the successes and limitations of the project, contributing to the formulation of evidence-based recommendations for the development of a local disaster risk reduction strategy.

## **4. RESEARCH RESULTS**

### **4.1. Results**

The findings of this study, derived from a comprehensive expert interview with a municipal official directly involved in the PREPS project, offer valuable insights into the project's planning, implementation, and outcomes within the Municipality of Samac. The interview provided rich, contextualized data that illuminate the institutional practices, inter-organizational collaboration, and citizen engagement strategies that underpinned the

project's execution. The following thematic synthesis captures the most salient aspects of the interview, organized in line with the study's guiding research themes.

#### ***4.1.1. Introduction to the PREPS Project and Its Implementation***

The Project for Increasing Resilience to Natural Disasters and Enhancing Preparedness Strategy (PREPS) was initiated in response to the critical need for enhancing local resilience to natural disasters, particularly floods, which had severely impacted the Municipality of Samac in 2014. The project was implemented following a successful application to a public call issued by Catholic Relief Services (CRS), a faith-based humanitarian organization. Formal cooperation was established through a series of agreements, including the bilateral agreement between CRS and the Municipality and a tripartite agreement involving local community representatives. A multidisciplinary working group was formed to coordinate efforts, comprising representatives from municipal institutions, public enterprises, and civil society organizations.

The primary objectives of the PREPS initiative were to reduce flood risks, remove illegal landfills, clean drainage channels, procure and distribute emergency response equipment, and strengthen the operational capacity of the civil protection system. Project implementation involved the development of tailored action plans for ten local communities, the definition of technical specifications, and the establishment of co-financing arrangements with CRS and other stakeholders. A wide range of activities were conducted, including field simulations, training sessions for civil protection officers and local stakeholders, and flood simulation exercise "Samac 2022". Key partners were institutions, organizations and companies from the territory of the Samac Municipality, including: Territorial Fire Department, Public Utility Company "Water Supply and Sewerage", Electric company "Electro Doboј" - field unit Samac, Public Primary Health Center and Public Social Work Center, Municipal Red Cross Organization Samac and Veterinary Station, then volunteer associations as Kayak Club "Usce" and Ecological Association "Ekob" Samac and MMB-INEXCOOP the company engaged in the production and trade of animal feed. Most of the invited stakeholders actively participated in the meetings and the project implementation process.

#### ***4.1.2. Field-Level Activities and Operationalization***

Field-level interventions played a central role in operationalizing the PREPS project's objectives. Notably, substantial efforts were directed at improving municipal infrastructure and emergency preparedness capacities. Specific actions included the removal of illegal waste dumps, clearing of vulnerable canal segments, and the installation of waste containers to prevent future unauthorized dumping. Additionally, essential protective and rescue equipment was procured to strengthen the municipality's emergency response framework. These activities had immediate environmental and public health benefits and significantly enhanced the community's preparedness for future natural hazards.

#### ***4.1.3. Citizen Engagement and Participation***

Community engagement was a key pillar of the PREPS project. Particular emphasis was placed on education and capacity building to increase public awareness and preparedness. Training sessions were delivered to members of civil protection headquarters, especially the presidents of local community councils, equipping them with the knowledge and skills needed for effective crisis response. Citizen mobilization was further supported through public notices, written calls, and volunteer initiatives. Although the project successfully engaged approximately 30 individuals—18 of whom were women—challenges remained, including limited availability of citizens due to work obligations, low levels of awareness, and resource constraints. Nevertheless, through broad media coverage (via TV "HIT" Brcko,

BN TV, and RTRS), the project reached a wider audience and contributed to the long-term goal of fostering a culture of shared responsibility and disaster readiness.

#### ***4.1.4. Collaboration with Local and Regional Partners***

A multi-level and multi-sectoral collaboration model was integral to the successful implementation of the PREPS project. At the operational level, the project benefitted from strong partnerships with local institutions and regional authorities, including the Civil Protection Administration of the Republic of Srpska and various public service providers such as the Electric Company and Health Center. Non-governmental and community-based organizations, including the Kayak Club "Usce" and the Ecological Association "Ekob" Samac, also played significant roles in field operations, training delivery, and public outreach. Strategic collaboration with CRS was particularly influential, providing not only financial support but also technical expertise and project guidance. While these partnerships greatly enhanced coordination and efficiency, challenges such as uneven partner engagement and the complexity of managing diverse institutional mandates occasionally impeded consistent progress across all implementation areas.

#### ***4.1.5. Contextual Factors and Challenges***

The geographical and climatic characteristics of the Samac Municipality, particularly its position in the Sava River valley, make it acutely vulnerable to flooding. These contextual factors shaped the design and prioritization of project activities. As a result, the project emphasized targeted flood risk mitigation measures, such as the cleaning of drainage infrastructure, improvement of civil protection mechanisms, and acquisition of relevant emergency equipment. Although these adaptations effectively addressed local risks, ongoing vulnerabilities and resource constraints presented persistent implementation challenges.

#### ***4.1.6. Evaluation and Monitoring***

Project monitoring and evaluation were conducted through both internal and external mechanisms, with specific indicators tailored to local conditions. Key outcomes included the cleaning of over 5,000 square meters of canals and the removal of approximately 5 tons of waste. The acquisition of a mulcher and a rescue boat significantly boosted local response capabilities. Public education campaigns also enhanced awareness and community preparedness. However, the evaluation process faced several difficulties, including limited documentation, insufficient field data, and resource limitations for continuous monitoring. Among the unanticipated positive outcomes was the provision of free sewer cleaning services to residents of the targeted communities, made possible through the transfer of project-acquired equipment to the municipal utility company. Additionally, local authorities agreed to waive related service fees for two years, highlighting the project's socio-economic contributions.

#### ***4.1.7. Cooperation with International and Faith-Based Organizations***

The role of international and religious humanitarian organizations, where most notably CRS, was central to the success of the PREPS initiative. These organizations contributed both financial and technical resources, enabling the municipality to implement comprehensive disaster risk reduction strategies. Engagement was facilitated through public calls, meetings, international delegations, and ongoing communication between local authorities and faith-based actors. The credibility and extensive networks of these organizations proved essential in mobilizing community participation and institutional support. Their operational philosophy, grounded in principles of solidarity and inclusivity regardless of religious or ethnic background, aligned closely with the project's humanistic and development goals.

#### ***4.1.8. Future Plans and Expectations through 2030***

Sustainability of the PREPS project outcomes is envisioned through the continued use of procured equipment, institutionalization of knowledge from training activities, and the routine engagement of municipal services in maintaining cleaned infrastructure. Strategic plans include regular field monitoring, investment in infrastructure, and public awareness campaigns, alongside enhanced enforcement mechanisms such as municipal policing to prevent illegal dumping. These forward-looking strategies are expected to contribute significantly to the reduction of disaster risk in Samac by 2030 and to the development of a resilient, well-prepared local governance system.

#### ***4.1.9. Recommendations and Concluding Reflections***

The Samac experience with PREPS illustrates the value of integrated, community-based approaches to disaster risk reduction. The success of the project reinforces the need for continued investment in similar initiatives across Bosnia and Herzegovina, adapted to local risk profiles and socio-economic contexts. Lessons learned have already been applied in the response to subsequent disasters, including the 2024 floods in Jablanica and the earthquake in Stolac, underscoring the importance of inter-municipal solidarity and shared learning.

A key recommendation is to enhance access to international funding mechanisms and ensure stronger support from higher levels of government. Expanding collaboration with both secular and faith-based international organizations is also advised, given their proven capacity to deliver effective, community-sensitive humanitarian assistance. Strengthening such partnerships will be crucial for building resilient systems capable of withstanding and adapting to future natural hazards.

### **4.2. Discussion**

Catholic Relief Services demonstrates that effective disaster risk management does not begin after a natural disaster strikes, but long before. Investing in prevention, preparedness, and resilience can save significant resources, but more importantly, it will save lives and preserve livelihoods. DRR activities that rely on local initiative and knowledge not only strengthen trust in communities but also build systemic resilience. The Catholic Relief Services model represents good practice that can be adapted to other local and regional contexts, especially in communities vulnerable to natural disasters.

The "Samac 2022" exercise, conducted on April 19, 2022, in the Municipality of Samac, was an essential component of the project "Strengthening Resilience to Natural Disasters and Enhancing Preparedness Strategies in BiH and Serbia." This exercise aimed to evaluate and improve the readiness of local emergency response teams in handling disaster scenarios, particularly flooding. It simulated various real-world crises, including rising river levels, water rescues, car extractions from fallen trees, and flood evacuations, involving various emergency services and local organizations. Participants included the Republic Civil Protection Administration, police, fire departments, the Red Cross, and healthcare units, among others. Historically, the area has been subject to huge floods; thus, exercising floods preparedness in the particular of Samac Municipality, with massive destruction, is of utmost importance to strengthen the capability of the local population to adequately face the hazards in the future. This flood simulation exercise measured the capacity, ability, and readiness of local forces in coordination and action during a crisis situation to augment resilience and build upon stronger community ties.

Action Plans for local communities exposed to recurring natural disasters have been developed in close collaboration with public institutions on the lines of DRR. The plans will

provide for the involvement of local people and seek to build heightened awareness among them about their collective responsibility toward resilience development. By promoting a culture of preparedness and enhancing cooperation between citizens and local authorities, the Action Plans will contribute to the strategic improvement of DRR principles and practices at the community level. Continued cooperation with partners like CRS will allow Samac and other localities to better prepare for future natural disasters, protecting the safety and welfare of their citizens.

A significant development in Samac Municipality within the PREPS Project lies in the strengthening of local civil protection units, thereby greatly improving operational readiness. The smooth conduct of evacuation and rescue exercises has increased coordination and preparedness among all participating emergency services and community actors. At the same time, the involvement of Samac's local authorities and communities in advanced DRR trainings has promoted the culture of resilience and shared responsibility. Small grants were given to the municipality as a win-win approach used for building capacity to address local needs in both disaster response and preventive initiatives. Through this project, unambiguous institutional frameworks lay down rules and regulations for disaster prevention and response and thus provide for the legal basis within which Samac local authorities may pursue disaster risk reduction efforts through the formal adoption of comprehensive DRR policies and procedures: a crucial milestone in achieving sustainable, strategic disaster risk governance.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS**

The fortification of civil protection units, the successful execution of evacuation and rescue exercises, and the involvement of local authorities and communities in expert DRR trainings are important project outcomes. Small grants were also given out to improve the community's ability to better address the needs of the populace in disaster response and preventive initiatives. Clear frameworks for disaster prevention and response were established as a result of the initiative, which also led to local authorities preparing and adopting DRR policies and procedures.

These activities were part of the Project for Increasing Resilience to Natural Disasters and Enhancing Preparedness Strategy (PREPS) in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. By engaging The Catholic Relief Services in DRR at the local level, expert, material, and practical support was offered to local governments and communities that are most vulnerable to recurring natural disasters. After implementation, the local government of Samac became stronger and more resilient and continued to make long-term efforts to build safer and more resilient communities. The project successfully implemented the Community-Led Disaster Risk Management (CLDRM) approach and highlights the importance of inclusive and participatory approaches in managing disaster risks. The project effectively built a strong network of various stakeholders, bringing together civil protection services, health centers, local government officials, volunteer groups, private companies, and community members. This collaboration significantly boosted the community's ability to anticipate, prepare for, and respond to natural disasters by effectively combining resources, operational capabilities, and expertise. Such integrative efforts are essential for developing resilient systems that can effectively address and adapt to emerging challenges.

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