

Inclusion of persons with disabilities in natural disaster preparedness and response

What was said at a meeting of the Ministry of Climate Crisis, the European Center for Forest Fires and the National Technical University of Athens

The development of actions to avoid risks for people with disabilities during the occurrence of natural disasters and their inclusion in dealing with them were the focus of a conference held on Tuesday, entitled "Inclusion in disaster preparedness and response: Active participation of people with disabilities in evacuation exercises" at the Ministry of Climate Crisis and Civil Protection. As reported by APE-MPE, the purpose of the meeting was the exchange of opinions and experiences, the recording of existing limitations and legislative / operational gaps, as well as the open discussion of proposals to strengthen the ability of vulnerable groups to effectively deal with emergency situations.

The Minister of State, Giorgos Gerapetritis, mentioned the National Action Plan for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, emphasizing that this is an initiative that is implemented horizontally for the first time in Greece, with the aim of becoming at the highest level, in accordance with the United Nations' guidelines.

"The National Action Plan for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has become a text that is a point of reference for the Greek state, and subsequently, on the basis of this plan, today we can talk about a large public perspective concerning persons with disabilities. All actions are evolving and we believe that with the activation of this new plan we will have a much higher level of inclusion of our fellow citizens with disabilities", noted Mr. Gerapetritis.

It is a coherent framework, he added, which synthesizes into a single "umbrella" of policy, actions from all ministries and agencies related to the special care that the state owes to people with disabilities - including the Ministry of Climate Crisis and Civil Protection, as the body responsible for informing and raising awareness among citizens, but also the operational adequacy to cover the different needs of all people with disabilities, in every emergency situation.

"It is common knowledge that people with disabilities are disproportionately affected by disasters of all kinds. Therefore, their participation in the disaster management cycle both at the stage of preparedness and response is not only a desire, but also an obligation if

we want to strengthen the overall resilience of the population", pointed out the general secretary of Civil Protection, Vasilios Papageorgiou. He then referred in detail to the actions taken by the ministry since 2021 for the inclusion of people with disabilities in disaster preparedness and response. Specifically, the Ministry of Climate Crisis and Civil Protection:

- Participates in the National Action Plan for the rights of Persons with Disabilities.
- On its website, videos of self-protection instructions from each type of natural disaster were created with the addition of sign language interpretation with embedded subtitles and full voiceover of content.
- It has become possible to automatically locate the caller to 112, a feature of critical importance for the provision of immediate assistance.
- Information actions are planned at the municipal level to disseminate information and synergies are developed with the Municipalities through the compilation of lists with contact details of persons with disabilities, following their prior express consent, as well as targeted protection actions. In this way, it becomes possible in emergency situations to provide coordinated, immediate and effective assistance to these people.
- The action plans to deal with risks (indicatively "DARDANOS", "IOLAOS", "VOREAS") ensure the provision of instructions during their implementation especially for our fellow citizens with disabilities, while already before the establishment of the ministry, the General Secretariat of Civil Protection, in collaboration with the Center for Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind (KEAT), had proceeded to issue self-protection instructions from disasters in Braille code.
- Finally, in cooperation with the United Nations and in the context of the interregional meeting of Eastern Mediterranean and Balkan countries held in Athens on October 21, a specialized workshop was held with the aim of including vulnerable groups of the population in building resilience against risk disasters.

"We must not leave anyone behind in an emergency, in a fire, in an earthquake," stressed the president of the Central Union of Municipalities of Greece (KEDE), Dimitris Papastergiou, adding that the needs of cities need to be recorded and mapped. Mr. Papastergiou stated that a strategy should be developed that would have a personalized approach to what each society has to face while pointing

out that a first action would be to record the condition and vulnerability of buildings where people with disabilities live.

Its president, Efthymis Lekkas, mentioned the actions taken by the Anti-Seismic Planning and Protection Organization (OASP), emphasizing that the OASP has made a decisive contribution to the earthquake protection of the country through a multitude of actions. "A dominant action is the education and information of the population. The organization has increased the perception of seismic risk in the Greek citizen always starting with education. The organization, from the new possibilities given, will make a decisive contribution through the application of new technologies to the reduction of the risk that concerns our fellow citizens with disabilities", he noted.

In the National Plan for Accessibility based on the risks caused by the climate crisis prepared by the Ministry of the Interior, the general secretary of Spatial Planning and Urban Environment of the Ministry of Interior, Efthymis Bakoyannis, mentioned that it is a means of strategic planning with a vision of upgrading the country to a fully accessible and man-made environment that will implement this necessary design and make it more resilient to climate change.

For his part, the representative of ESAMEA, Konstantinos Gargalis, spoke about the obstacles faced by people with disabilities and chronic diseases, obstacles that require, as he said, enhanced protection and specialized action. Regarding the risks from disasters, Mr. Gargalis proposed some actions and actions that could be carried out by the state for the inclusion of individuals in dealing with disasters such as: the networking of services with the disability movement at central and local level to identify problems, the control of all political plans and civil protection protocols in cooperation with the disability movement and the development of individual action plans on a case-by-case basis, the training of service personnel and volunteers in bodies related to disability and chronic illness, developing systems and ways of warning and communicating citizens with disabilities and chronic illness, accessible to them and taking special measures to prevent and protect citizens who are discriminated against. "The implementation of these must always focus on the respect and dignity of citizens with disabilities and chronic conditions and take into account the fact that all disabilities are not visible and cannot be treated in the same way," noted Mr. Gargalis emphasizing that close cooperation with the disabled movement is necessary.

The workshop discussed, among other things, the participation of disabled people in evacuation drills to strengthen resilience against impending disasters, earthquake protection guidelines, examples of inclusion from other countries as well as the use of 112 for disabled people. The conference was co-organized by the Ministry of Climate Crisis and Civil Protection, the European Center for Forest Fires/Council of Europe and the National Technical University of Athens.

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