

# **Fostering Resilience and Performance of International Disaster Response Teams**

## **The Diversity Icebreaker in Training Courses for UNDAC and EUCPT members**

Maïka Skjønsberg, Matthieu Kollig

### **Brief**

International teams that engage in disaster response coordination usually operate in volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous environments. In order to contribute to team cohesion, efficiency, flexibility and resilience, the Diversity Icebreaker process was integrated into two training courses for disaster response experts: The *induction training* of the *United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination* (UNDAC) system and the *Team Leadership Course* (TLC) of the *European Union's Civil Protection Mechanism* (EUCPM) training programme. The results of these pilots give reasons to argue that the Diversity Icebreaker process provides essential learning opportunities and that its application in the future could contribute to building stronger teams, connecting stakeholders, and facilitating decision making and problem solving in high-stress situations that require rapid, coordinated action.

### **International Disaster Response**

When a disaster strikes a country, its national disaster response capacities can be overstretched. The government of the affected country can then decide to request the help of the international community. When an earthquake or a cyclone strikes, for example, a timely response is crucial to find survivors. The first days after the event are very important. In such a scenario, when you have emergency responders coming from all over the world to support the affected country, coordination is absolutely key. Having a well-coordinated response means that when national authorities are overwhelmed, they have a single point of contact. Coordination aims at reducing the duplication of efforts and ensures the assistance delivered reaches the priority areas and the most affected communities.

Both the *United Nations* (UN) and the *European Union* (EU) have mechanisms to coordinate international help. The *United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination* (UNDAC) was created 30 years ago and is managed by the *UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs* (OCHA) and hosts a roster of professionals who can be deployed on short notice to any location worldwide. UNDAC team members are trained to assess the needs of affected communities and to coordinate the delivery of humanitarian assistance, including food, shelter, medical care and other life-saving supplies and services. The EU also established a mechanism in 2001 to improve prevention, preparedness, and response to disasters by strengthening the collaboration of EU countries on civil protection (*EU Civil Protection Mechanism*, EUCP). In 2022 for example, the Mechanism was activated 106 times to respond to war in Ukraine, wildfires in Europe, COVID-19 in Europe and floods in Pakistan. Whilst the EUCP coordinates the response efforts of the EU member states (and 10 Non-EU participating states), UNDAC is designed to help the UN and governments of disaster-affected countries bring together humanitarian actors, which will often include the EU, to ensure a coherent response. When deployed together, UNDAC and EUCP team members are often working hand in hand. They also conduct exercises together to better coordinate on the ground.

Members of UNDAC and EUCP are highly trained to respond quickly and efficiently in any situation. For each disaster, a new team is created. The composition of the team depends on the

availability of the people in the roster, their profile, their language skills etc. Team members may meet at the airport on the way to the disaster hit area. Or they'll meet later, maybe in one of those tents that serve as the Emergency Operation Coordination Center and start working 24/7. The challenge is that they have to build a team with people they may never have met before. The teams consist of members with different personalities, professions and cultural backgrounds. The experts get little rest and need to perform quickly in an unprecedented, volatile situation: Every disaster is different. Vital information and local knowledge can be difficult to access, the lack of resources and conflicting interests result in challenging dilemmas, high risks inflict high pressure. Although handbooks and guidelines may provide orientation, ultimately decisions will be taken by the team there and then. Under these circumstances, the diversity of the team has to be managed well, so that different beliefs, expectations and cultural differences don't lead to poor performance.

Both UNDAC and EUCP training courses cover teamwork and leadership because it is absolutely crucial that the team functions well and one of the highest risks for the mission is poor team performance. Both programmes also cover intercultural communication and personal skills. The Diversity Icebreaker process was introduced into both trainings in 2023. For UNDAC it was piloted in the *induction training* (for new roster members) and for the EU it was integrated in the *Team Leadership Course* (TLC). Both pilots proved very successful and promising.

## **Action**

### **Example 1: Integration of the Diversity Icebreaker into the UNDAC induction course.**

The UNDAC induction training is a 2-week training. It includes one week of lessons and one week of field exercise. Each course gathers around 30 participants from all over the world and there are two courses per year. Half of the participants work for OCHA (or other UN agencies) whilst the other half is composed of civil protection staff from different countries.

#### Standard face-to-face Diversity Icebreaker Session with individual learning opportunity

This session was integrated in a half-day session on cultural awareness, interpersonal skills, and team building. This particular training was conducted in French and 30 participants were introduced to DI and took the test using their mobile phones. They split in three groups according to their main colour and discussed the results in the groups before presenting their findings in the plenary. They established a basic understanding of Red, Blue and Green tendencies and learned about the strengths and weaknesses of the different colours. The session was conducted at the beginning of the cultural awareness session as a way to acknowledge communalities across all the different cultures present in the room. It was a great icebreaker because everyone can relate to the Red, Blue and Green preferences – regardless of profession, culture, gender or age. Following the Diversity Icebreaker process, the focus was teamwork in challenging environments and how it's important to understand that we all have different preferred communication styles and that we need to adapt our communication style and way of working if we want to build a performing team. Participants then received a code to access the DI Premium. They were invited to individually learn more regarding their profile and how to best interact with other profiles.

### **Example 2: Integration of the Diversity Icebreaker into a hybrid Leadership Program**

The *Team Leadership Course* (TLC) is one of several courses that make up the European Union's Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM) training programme. This programme has been set up for civil protection and emergency management personnel to enhance prevention, preparedness and disaster response across the globe. The TLC was designed in 2023 to specifically train experts with leadership responsibility. The Diversity Icebreaker (DI) Process was integrated in different phases of the TLC to address a number of training objectives.

### Online Diversity Icebreaker Session

This session was integrated in a half day webinar preceding the 6-day face-to-face course. 15 participants were introduced to DI and took the test using digital devices. They discussed the results in breakout rooms and presented their findings in the plenary. They established a basic understanding of Red, Blue and Green tendencies, learned about their personal profile and shared their respective individual strengths, weaknesses and blind spots. This session aimed at creating an appropriate working atmosphere within the learning team, building the capacity of building trust with team members and contributing to establishing professional relationships in the team.

### Application and learning opportunities in the face-to-face course

The insights gained in the online session were used on day 3 of the face-to-face course focusing on team internal dynamics. The tendencies Red Blue and Green were framed as the deep diversity of the European Union Civil Protection Team (EUCPT) and applied in three learning opportunities:

- a) In groups of 3, participants imagined they were on mission and managed a team building session. They created real life team profiles based on their individual digital DI profiles established in the webinar and used the Red, Blue and Green categories to understand the team's needs regarding trust, relationship management and an adequate working atmosphere. They discussed how strengths and weaknesses reflected in their respective profiles might affect the performance of their team.
- b) In a simulation exercise, participants were confronted with conflicting incoming information. They had to influence each other in order to establish a synchronised view of the situation. This roleplay was assessed with a coach who gave feedback on Red, Blue or Green influencing skills and discussed how the team's strengths and weaknesses influenced their performance.
- c) In a next step, further information broadened the team's understanding of the situation and pushed the need for taking informed decisions on next steps. Instructed roleplayers contributed to conflict with Red, Blue or Green behaviour. This roleplay was also assessed with a coach who gave feedback on participant's conflict resolution skills.

### Individual Online Learning

Participants received a code that provides access to DI Premium. They are invited to individually learn more regarding their profile and how it connects to teamwork, collaboration, decision making, communication, potential conflict, taking on new roles and creative problem solving.

### **Results**

The participant's testimonials below provide a first impression regarding the effects of the Diversity Icebreaker process in disaster response team training courses. A wider and systematic use of the approach would be needed to draw more reliable, general conclusions.

Nevertheless, the participant's take-aways from the DI sessions and exercises hint at the importance of this particular training content and its very useful applications in the field. Some comments show that participants expect positive effects both internally (team) and externally (stakeholders). To some, the systematic learning process they experienced and the simplicity of the model supported memorising and using a common language to describe Red, Blue and Green tendencies. Other feedback reveals a desire to allocate more time and effort to deepen the learning outcome and to practise its implications. This implies that the training of personnel should meet the highest professional standards involving internal and external experts that have a deep understanding of cutting edge content.

Throughout the two weeks of the UNDAC induction training, participants referred to their learning outcomes based on the Diversity Icebreaker process - especially during the field exercise: "Ah yes, but that's because you're green" or "We need a red member in the team!". Many explained that this exercise had been extremely valuable to better understand their way of working and their management style and also made them reflect on previous difficult interactions with other colleagues. They found it was valuable not only in the UNDAC context to build trust among team members who don't know each other but also for their day-to-day work back home.

Inger-Johanne Tjoflaat is a senior sustainability and transition consultant with *Proactima*, a leading management consulting company in Norway. She has been on multiple missions for both the UN and the EU. She wrote in an email after participating in the TLC that the DI is "a super tool for crisis management team training, effectively facilitating rapid team familiarity - a crucial factor in disaster response scenarios." She highlighted how DI contributes to recognizing and integrating individual differences and how this in turn can lead to more cohesive and effective team responses: "This understanding is invaluable for disaster management teams, which often face high-stress situations requiring rapid, coordinated action." From Inger-Johanne's point of view, the Diversity Icebreaker method could be an essential leadership tool in disaster management - optimising team performance in real-life disaster responses.

In a conversation after participating in the TLC, Josef Riener, an independent consultant in Civil Protection and Emergency Management and Author of "*Krisen und Katastrophen Managen*" ("*Managing Crises and Disasters*") summed up his feedback regarding the input and learning based on the Diversity Icebreaker as "extremely positive". He felt that the Red, Blue and Green tendencies provided a leadership tool that helps to assess colleagues, stakeholders and negotiation counterparts. He said that understanding yourself and others in this way helps to predict reactions and facilitates better communication, collaboration, flow of information and negotiation. Josef said he immediately understood the usability of his insights even with counterparts whose profiles he didn't know. "If that's the case, you have to do some small talk or rely on a quick diagnosis: How will this person react?" He highlighted the applicability of his lessons learned and stated that the Diversity Icebreaker provided a Red thread and was one of his best take-aways from the TLC.

Another participant of the TLC, Chief Assistance and Rescue Officer at a national Civil Protection agency, agreed in a conversation that diversity is an important topic for leaders working in this field. Summing up his experience in multiple international disaster response missions, he said: "When you are deployed you will meet very many different people with different personalities and various cultural backgrounds. They all have their unique expectations and leaders need to understand how to deal with this!" He expressed his concern that this core issue deserves more attention in training courses. From his point of view, the TLC did not provide sufficient time to cover the know-how of dealing with diversity. He argued that there was not enough time to reflect individual scores and to learn from participant's experiences in the simulation exercises. "These issues take more time - maybe 2 - 3 days with a focus on diversity only".

## **Vision**

The examples above describe how the DI was integrated into training courses for experts who will contribute to international missions aiming at responding to disasters and preparing for them. The results invite to reflect on a few hypotheses regarding potential benefits for future missions:

### **1) Building stronger teams**

Understanding DI invites teams to understand strengths and realising and mitigating possible risks for team cohesion, e.g. due to internal conflicts. Visualising the team profile facilitates appreciation of differences and helps to consciously leverage the deep diversity of a team. A shared language to describe expectations and needs contributes to mutual trust and psychological safety. To achieve this, future teams could be trained to self-initiate and manage systematic team

building sessions. One approach would be to train future team leaders to conduct DI sessions themselves. If team members already understand the meaning of Red, Blue and Green a short 30 mins introduction of team members as simulated in the TLC can have substantial positive effects.

## 2) Connecting stakeholders

Successful international teams need to connect with a wide range of stakeholders when performing in a disaster environment. The categories Red, Blue and Green invite to focus on commonalities across borders - e.g. between cultures, organisations, organisational units, professional groups and disciplines. There are reasons to argue that understanding yourself and others based on the DI tendencies facilitates better communication, collaboration, flow of information, e.g. between UNDAC and EUCPT. Writing this article, we realised this potential of introducing DI to different stakeholders that need to collaborate in the field.

## 3) Decision making and problem solving

Teams who want to exert high-quality problem-solving and decision-making benefit from a systematic, facilitated approach. Sometimes - especially when a team is facing a complex challenge - this involves defining the problem or the objective. The use of the DI categories for this purpose has been practised successfully for a long time. Teams quickly achieve results taking the steps a) preparing individually b) mapping c) bridging and d) integrating. This process has not yet been taught in the pilots described above. Nevertheless, we have reasons to believe that it would be worthwhile.

Based on our experiences in the pilots, introducing the Diversity Icebreaker process to the UNDAC and EUCPT training courses is an innovative and efficient contribution to team cohesion, efficiency, flexibility and resilience - assets that are key to perform successfully in volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous environment.