



# ASSESSMENT STUDY OF THE ROLE OF NDMA<sub>s</sub> IN COVID 19 CRISIS RESPONSE AND IMPACT OF COVID 19 ON NDMA<sub>s</sub> OPERATIONS

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

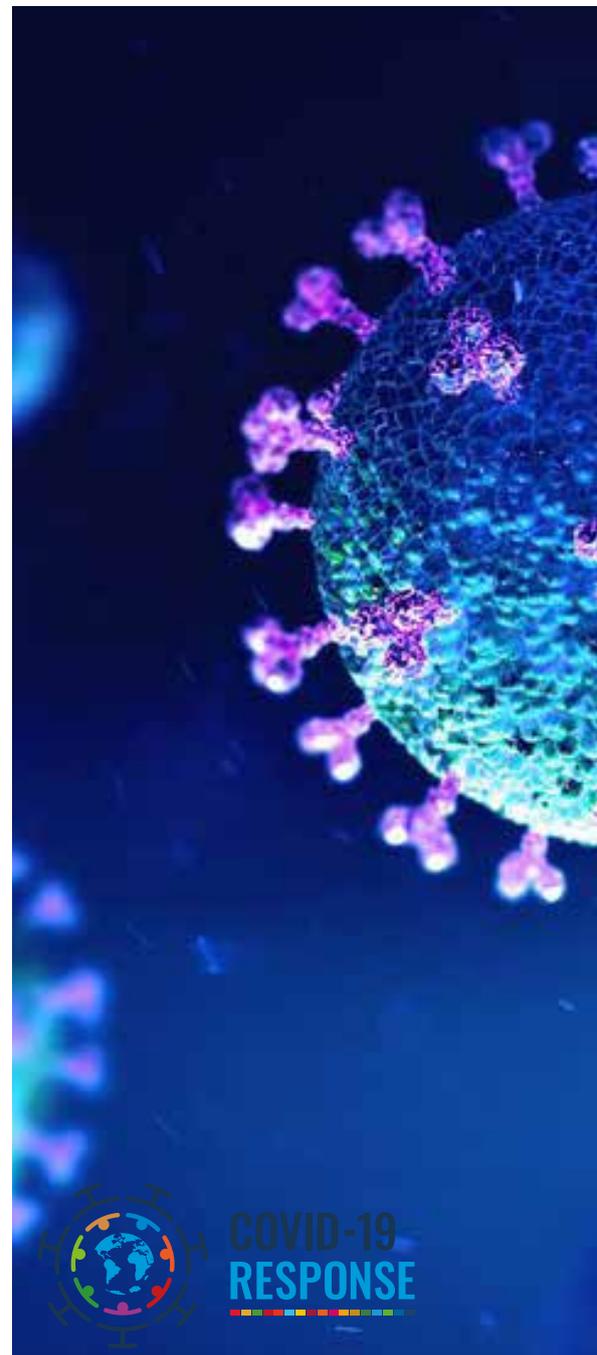
**Author:** Vasko Popovski, M.A.  
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## INTRODUCTION

As an emerging systemic risk and “a crisis like no other”, the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting the countries and territories around the globe in an unprecedented way. The “pandemic crisis of our lifetime” is causing record loss of lives and severe human suffering with more than 2.1 million deaths and 100 million people affected (as of 02 February 2021), leaving long-term consequences and impacting the societies and economies at their core i.e. biggest economic decline since the Great Depression, heavily impacting the communities exacerbating the existing and creating new vulnerabilities. The countries and territories in Europe and Central Asia have not been spared: since the first case reported in North Macedonia on 26 February 2020, there are more than 5.8 million cases with an approximate mortality of 1.4% of reported cases or 82 thousand deaths (as of 26 January 2021). All countries and territories were affected with progressive transition from incidental cases to widespread local transmissions throughout all regions. Consequently, the resilience of their societies and communities are being severely affected resulting in falls in gross domestic products, decreased income generation, increased unemployment and poverty rates, fewer remittances, reduction in access to services, increased food insecurity, worsened provision of risk reduction and emergency management services, etc.

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis emphasized the crucial role that the national and local governments play in mitigation and response to this type of complex crises, which impacts are cascading across the regions, countries and territories, challenging their preparedness and response systems and capabilities. The pandemic crisis brought anticipation, preparation, response and recovery needs to high-consequence, low-probability risk at the forefront of the resilience agenda, while strengthening the importance of robust risk governance. The approach towards this crisis and many more that we will face in the future needs, to begin with, the re-coding of our approach to disaster risk governance towards the designing of new models for mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery from complex disasters and high-consequences, low-probability events: the overall imperative will be to strengthen disaster risk governance for long-term resilience goals, with a key focus on the systemic and emerging risk.



1. With reference to this document, the Europe and Central Asia refers to the UNDP Europe and Central Asia programme region. <https://www.eurasia.undp.org/content/rbec/en/home/about-us/about-the-region.html>

This Assessment Study, commissioned by the UN Development Programme (UNDP) through its Istanbul Regional Hub (UNDP) and the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) through its regional office for Europe and Central Asia. The study provides an overview and findings of the comprehensive analysis of the role and effectiveness of the National Disaster Management Authorities (NDMAs) across the South Eastern Europe, Eastern Europe, South Caucasus and Central Asia region (Europe and Central Asia - ECIS) in the response and recovery efforts to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Its findings aim to support UNDP, UNDRR, UNCTs, NDMAs and other stakeholders in the region to draw lessons from the implementation approach to the COVID-19 response and forward-looking recommendations for the prevention, mitigation, preparedness and response to the future pandemic/biohazards crisis incorporating best practices and lessons learnt, identified needs and resources, while ensuring the sustainability of the actions. It was conducted during the period October – December 2020 and its process deployed several tools including an on-line survey of key respondents from the ECIS countries and territories and semi-structured interviews with representatives of UNDP, UNDRR, the European Science and Technology Advisory Group (ESTAG), NDMAs, national DRR platforms, Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative (DPPI), Center for Emergency Situations and Disaster Risk Reduction (CESDRR) and others. Besides, COVID-19 pandemic response snapshots of five countries from the four sub-regions of ECIS were prepared to reflect the various national approaches and experiences in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic crisis emphasizing the specific roles and responsibilities of the NDMAs i.e. Armenia from the South Caucasus sub-region, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia from the Western Balkan and Turkey sub-region, Kyrgyz Republic from Central Asia and Moldova from the Eastern Europe sub-region.

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**Note:** The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations, including UNDP, UNDRR or the UN Member States.

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## MAIN FINDINGS

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- This assessment underlines the extent to which NDMAs, while key entities within the disaster risk management systems in the countries and territories have only played a limited role during the response to this pandemic crisis.* NDMAs proved nevertheless critical in providing crucial coordination, communication and support services to the national and local response structures and mechanisms. Some of the main reasons for this can be identified in the existing legislative and institutional frameworks, where health emergencies are predominantly linked to the ministries of health and adjacent health emergency structures; as well as the insufficient mainstreaming of disaster risk reduction in public health and vice versa. This insufficient integration of public health aspects, which was confirmed during the response to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, impacts the overall resilience of national and local risk management systems.
- NDMAs are especially active in the provision of various services for facilitating the pandemic crisis response efforts through provision of their essential risk management services as well as the implementation of new ones required by the "new normal".* In this sense, NDMAs in the ECIS region showed a great level of transformability and quality e.g. improvisation, flexibility and adaptability to the existing pandemic crisis. Within their responsibilities for supporting the pandemic response, NDMAs delivered a set of activities aimed at supporting the citizens and the institutions while ensuring their regular functions. Many of these actions are beyond the essential competencies, but the NDMAs were implementing them successfully proving that in the absence of previous experience, precise response plans and recommendations for action, ongoing improvisation and creativity are important factors for successful emergency management during the response to the pandemic crisis.
- The COVID-19 pandemic as an emergent systemic risk needs a systemic response where the NDMAs from the region are partners and in many cases leading entities, since they have the required expertise and knowledge, past disasters experience, available resources.* The prolonged continuation of this crisis without knowing the ending scale and magnitude of its impact, as well as the potential of future pandemics/biohazards and other complex disasters, which scope is too big to be handled by any institution alone, emphasize the need to "re-frame" the disaster risk management while ensuring convergence of disaster risk governance and health, addressing emergent and systemic risk and threats from pandemics and biohazards, and accordingly updating the "scope of work" of NDMAs.
- The pandemic crisis has a significant impact on the DRM systems in the ECIS region pressuring their finite resources and chronically stressing the coping capabilities of the NDMAs. As a complex crisis, with many uncertainties i.e. severity, length, impact, it means that the NDMAs should further adapt to the situation and to absorb the external shocks while transforming themselves to continue operations as per the "new normal".* One thing is essential, the starting point on this transformational journey is to adapt the strategic and operational planning documents and processes to the "new normal", with better integration and prioritization of the pandemic risk/biohazards and public health in general, followed by capacity development, resource allocation and provision of fiscal stimulus. Some of the NDMAs will continue the development journey to better understanding the "noises from the future" using foresight or other future-oriented methodologies for planning to high-consequences, low-probability events, whether the majority of them will continue to operate within the existing or updated frameworks, with pandemics included. Transitioning of the disaster risk governance to the new reality and new uncertainties may drive the decisions and actions for mitigating the long-term effects of the pandemics – this may call for a paradigm shift of contemporary disaster risk governance to be better prepared for future systemic risk.
- NDMAs together with other institutions involved in the pandemic crisis response in the ECIS countries and territories do not have experience in this type of complex disasters and therefore they should assess and evaluate their response aimed for better preparedness and response for future complex*

*disasters and crisis.* Good examples and best practices can be learned from the countries and territories that have previously experienced serious pandemics e.g. Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of China, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand.

- *Ongoing pandemic crisis revealed a lack of effective global and regional health risk governance cooperation, with the main emphasis placed on the cooperation regarding the return of nationals, travel restrictions, cross-border controls or emergent supply of protective equipment and materials.* NDMAs needs to more actively cooperate on fighting this and future pandemic crises through timely information sharing, cross-border cooperation, as well as development and standardization of SOPs and other protocols. Regional initiatives provided overall coordination support in information and knowledge sharing and can play a significant role in future sub-regional and cross-border endeavour.
- *The COVID-19 Recovery Needs Assessment (CRNA) for assessment of the economic losses and human and social impacts on the most vulnerable citizens and the formulation of a recovery strategy are needed for resilient recovery phase.* Given the existing experience and lessons learnt from the past disasters, implementation of Post-disaster Needs Assessments and Resilient Recovery Frameworks, as well as the capacities for provision of coordination and support services, the NDMAs needs to be positioned as a key partner in the post-COVID-19 recovery process.
- *Like the other complex disasters, the COVID-19 pandemic crisis requires engagement of various institutions and entities in a multi-sector way to ensure timely and efficient response and resilient recovery. In that sense,* the National Platforms for disaster risk reduction can play a prominent role as a forum for advancing the disaster risk management systems in the countries and territories. In the ECIS region, they were not engaged in most of the countries and territories in which they are established, but there are positive examples from Armenia and the Kyrgyz Republic where they contributed to the implementation of small-scale actions and public awareness and information dissemination activities. On the other side, there are many evidences of active engagement of the national Red Cross/Red Crescent societies, civil society organizations, citizens-led initiatives and volunteers, which provided a crucial contribution no one to be left behind during the pandemic crisis response.
- *ICT innovative tools are the foundation for timely, efficient, effective and inclusive emergency management throughout the phases of the disaster cycle.* There is an evidence of successful use of the ICT technologies and innovative solutions for resilience in the ECIS region including this pandemic crisis response. Nevertheless, there is an impression that the existing solutions do not reach everyone in the society, especially the citizens with disabilities. Designing of innovative solutions, especially for information, early warning and alerting, needs to be implemented in an inclusive and participative manner, integrating the needs of the beneficiaries.
- *Complex disasters including the pandemic crisis such as the COVID-19, emphasize the importance of breaking the silos of the traditional disaster risk management, allowing for better mainstreaming of the biological hazards and health emergencies.* Prioritization of the strategic and operational actions is a modus operandi for the NDMAs development and broadening of their scope of competences. Accordingly, they should be managing the continuity of the existing response, followed by resilient recovering while emerging stronger, and finally, they should be better prepared for understanding the potential futures and to enable transformational changes and action to move from a static to a dynamic model of actions i.e. to foresight the futures and insight the strategies and actions. This should lead to a development of the so-called Next Generation (NextGen) NDMAs framework, where they should be better organized and prepared for anticipation, prevention and reaction to new and complex risks and threats, with additional knowledge and expertise gained expanded competencies and availability of specific resources.
- *The COVID-19 pandemic is not a typical crisis and therefore the response and the post-crisis recovery needs to be untypical, evaluating the past, understanding the presence and envisaging the future.* Its lessons learned indeed demonstrated that

countries and territories that had in place disaster risk management strategies, multi-hazard, multi-risk and multi-sector assessments, which cover health emergencies and improvised while responding, found themselves better prepared to react to pandemic risk/biohazards.

## EMERGING LESSONS-LEARNED

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- The pandemic crisis highlights the need to modify the existing frameworks for resilience by integration of the pandemic risk/biohazards in the strategic documents (Target E of the Sendai Framework) and operational planning documents for better mitigation, response and recovery from crises of this magnitude.
- High-consequences, low probability events will be more frequent in the future and the multi-hazard, multi-risk assessments integrating the pandemics risk/biohazards needs to be forward-looking, non-linear, understanding the future.
- The “new normal” contributed to the transformation and business continuity of the NDMA’s by provision of new emergency services and use of e-communication tools and solutions for continuous operation.
- Leveraged multi-sector approach enables enhanced coordination and cooperation beyond the existing response and better planning and mitigating the future pandemic risk/biohazards.
- Expertise and potential exist, but it is needed to further invest in professional knowledge and specialized training of the emergency responders on the pandemic risk/biohazards.
- Resilient recovery of emergency responders needs to be established during this type of complex disasters with follow-up and psychological support contributing to their overall well-being.
- Re-designing of emergency services (ambulance and medical) resulted from the impact of the COVID-19 aimed for better provision of services to the citizens.
- Continued engagement of volunteers and community members, as well as citizens-led initiatives during this pandemic crisis, ensured no one is left behind.
- “Green Recovery” considers as a modus operandi for mitigating the impacts of existing pandemic crisis and prevention of future pandemic risk/biohazards.
- Local authorities need to be granted with greater competences and responsibilities from the health emergency area enabling them to become effective and efficient first preventers and first responders.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

**Based on the findings of this assessment study and the lessons learnt from countries and territories aimed at mitigating the prolonged impacts of COVID-19 crisis or any future pandemic crisis, this report lays out a set of recommendations:**

### General recommendations

- Strengthen the disaster risk governance in the ECIS region for future pandemic risk/biohazards through their integration in the relevant strategic documents contributing to the achievement of Sendai Framework Target E and operational planning frameworks reflecting the systemic nature of the risk and better preparing the national risk management systems for the prevention and response to complex disasters.
- NDMA shall lead the process of adoption of the multi-hazard, multi-risk and multi-sector risk and hazard assessments and disaster response plans, on behalf of the national and local governments.
- Scenario planning and training exercises are vital for testing the capabilities and readiness of the national systems for better preparedness and response to pandemics and needs to be fully integrated into NDMA's work.
- Develop NDMA's contingency plans and ensuring the NDMA's business continuity given the potential disruptions resulting from the pandemic crisis and complex disasters.
- Application of the CRNA methodology for assessments of the recovery needs and formulation of recovery frameworks, led by the NDMA resulting from their previous engagement with PDNA and Resilience Recovery Frameworks.
- Enhance the decentralization and/or transfer of competencies from national to local levels for improved disaster risk governance enabling timely, effective and efficient identification and response to the existing palette of risks and threats, while being prepared for the new futures.

## RECOMMENDATIONS RELATED TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC CRISIS RESPONSE

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- “Understanding what went well and what were the gaps during the pandemic crisis response” is aimed for improved follow-up response and codification of lessons-learnt for better preparedness and response for future complex disasters and crisis.
- Proactive approach and strengthening of the disasters-humanitarian coordination, cooperation and communication during the pandemic crisis response fully utilizing the capacities and resources of the NDMAs.
- Given the complexity and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, standard operating procedures and other protocols to be regularly reviewed to reflect the existing response experiences, lessons-learnt enabling better operational response and preparedness for the future pandemic crisis.
- Support the response efforts to pandemic risk/biohazards with use of ICT innovative solutions, especially for information, early warning and alerting, implemented in an inclusive and participative manner, integrating the needs of all beneficiaries.
- Use of existing sub-regional mechanisms and initiatives for disaster risk reduction and further promotion and strengthening of the cross-border and regional cooperation for resilience.
- Ensure gender-equal and inclusive response to and recovery from to the pandemic crisis.
- Leverage the power of partnerships for pandemic crisis response and recovery while leaving no one behind.

## RECOMMENDATIONS RELATED TO THE FUTURE PANDEMIC RISK/BIOHAZARDS

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- Create enabling policy and normative environment for resilience ensuring a better understanding of the systematic risk, greater mainstreaming of health aspects and pandemic risk/biohazards, as well as the potential of the high-consequence, low probability events.
- Build the capacities and expertise of the NDMAs for the pandemic risk/biohazards through professional development and specialized training of staff.
- Integrate the research & development in partnership with academia and the private sector for designing innovative solutions for prevention and response of pandemics/biohazards.
- Provide stable and regular financing of NDMAs for risk reduction and resilience activities, including for the complex emergencies, such as combination of COVID and disaster from natural hazards.

## THE WAY FORWARD - POTENTIAL NDMAS DEVELOPMENT PATHWAYS

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Following the assessment review framework and the needs for the transformational change of the NDMAs as part of the efforts for re-framing the overall disaster risk management, three development pathways for the NDMAs in the ECIS region were identified:

- **Status Quo Scenario (Business as usual)** – The NDMAs continue to operate within the existing legal and institutional arrangements adapted to the pandemic crisis response. This scenario is least disruptive to the existing structures and relatively simple to implement. Time framework is continuous, up to twelve months: it is most likely to happen in most of the countries and territories.
- **Linear scenario (Emerging stronger)** - Essential improvement of the NDMAs normative and operational frameworks resulting from the experiences and lessons learnt from the pandemic crisis. It shall be based upon integration of the systemic risk and health emergency aspects as well as provisions of more competencies for mitigation, response to and recovery from complex disasters. This scenario is more difficult to implement and can be disruptive to the existing normative and institutional structures. The approximate time framework is 12 – 24 months: it is somewhat likely to happen and only in some of the countries and territories.
- **Dynamic scenario (Thriving into uncertainty – NextGen NDMAs)** – Establishment of new normative and operational frameworks and comprehensive transformation of NDMAs and their working operations, fully prepared for anticipation, prevention, response and recovery from complex disasters, with established foresight for development capacities. It leads to the establishment of Next Generation (*NextGen*) NDMAs. This scenario is most difficult to implement and can be disruptive to the existing NDMAs institutional structures and professionals. The reviewed time framework is two to four years; it is least likely to happen and only in a few of the countries and territories.

