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**EUROPEAN AND MEDITERRANEAN MAJOR HAZARDS AGREEMENT  
(EUR-OPA)**

**CULTURE AGAINST DISASTERS  
PROTECTING CULTURAL LANDSCAPES  
AS PREVENTION OF NATURAL DISASTERS**

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**DRAFT CONCEPT NOTE**

## 1. KEY WORDS

- Cultural landscapes, Disaster prevention, Traditional agriculture, Local knowledge

## 2. BACKGROUND

- Cultural landscapes (CLs) – - defined by UNESCO as “the combined works of nature and man” – are striking proof of transformations made by local communities to adapt a given area to their needs. They are also, however, proof of intelligent transformations, which are inherently respectful of environmental balance, as they were aimed at enabling the production of food for as long as possible.
- The transformations which remain to the present day are those which have survived all the natural disasters occurring at the local level.
- Recent disasters which have affected CLs (2011: five flash floods in Italy) have proven that abandoning and/or neglecting land transforms rains which were only exceptional into disasters.
- Many disasters have demonstrated that local risks were well known by the population, but that this knowledge was ignored before the event occurred, even if it was acknowledged by the media immediately after the disaster, thus becoming “newsworthy”.
- The usual approach in the field of disaster/heritage must therefore be overturned: CLs must not be considered as passive entities in the fight to “**protect against** natural disasters”, because safeguarding them is in fact an active tool for “**preventing** natural disasters”. Therefore, reference should not be made to “disasters versus culture”, but rather to “culture as prevention against disasters”.
- The major international institutions recommend that disaster prevention be included in sustainable development projects.
- As CLs are nearly always related to farming, adequate land maintenance depends on the profitability of the crops which characterise them.
- In general, traditional cultivation techniques are labour-intensive.

## 3. PROBLEMS

- Traditional farming techniques which characterise CLs are rarely the subject of academic studies or research, which contributes to their decline.
- Maintaining traditional farming techniques (retaining walls, specific irrigation systems) is costly.

- The low profitability of farming and pressure from tourism contribute to land either being abandoned or overexploited.
- In many CLs, the size of the farms is well below the minimum required by the CAP programmes, which prevents them from having access to EU subsidies.
- Communities' knowledge of local risks is not the subject of media interest before a disaster occurs and is often ignored by policy-makers. If this knowledge is highlighted by the media, policy-makers, who are always seeking to raise their profile, will not hesitate to intervene.
- Transmitting local knowledge to new generations is a challenge because of a lack of interest, insufficient attention given to needs and migration from rural to urban areas. Therefore, knowledge is lost with population ageing.
- Safeguarding CLs as a prevention against natural disasters not only entails a cross-disciplinary approach; it also requires policies and resources which are within the remit of several EU sectors (landscape, culture, agriculture and civil protection), whose co-ordination is as necessary as it is difficult.

#### **4. WHAT COULD BE HELPFUL IN ADDRESSING CHALLENGES**

- Safeguarding CLs through support for agriculture, the revival of traditional farming techniques as well as conduct tested by hundreds of disasters which have occurred through the centuries, could help to transmit to future generations an unspoiled landscape and a heritage of knowledge, while also preventing natural disasters and enabling sustainable development.
- Traditional techniques (for construction, agriculture, land-use planning, irrigation, etc.) which characterise European CLs differ according to the areas concerned and depending on the locally available resources, but they always reflect the same "rules" for preventing local natural disasters. It is therefore possible to systemise them by carrying out a comparative analysis and exchanging good practices from one country to another.
- Mediterranean countries provide excellent examples both of traditional natural disaster management strategies (water management techniques, anti-desertification soil husbandry, terrace farming and earthquake-resistant structures) and of disasters exacerbated by the relevant losses (flash floods, desertification).
- Cross-Mediterranean co-operation is encouraged by national and EU institutions.
- Preventing disasters is recognised as essential to building up a sustainable development process. This process requires that all local stakeholders (elected representatives, businessmen, citizens, etc.) be involved. Preventing natural disasters and starting a process of sustainable development by safeguarding CLs with participatory interventions becomes both possible and advisable.

- There is growing interest in traditional spatial planning techniques in UNESCO's policies.
- Publicising by local media, local risks recognised by the community - and traditional techniques for mitigating them - could ensure widespread publicity for well-targeted preventive actions and entice policy-makers to develop them.