



**Statement: Krzysztof Zyman, Executive Secretary
European and Mediterranean Major Hazards Agreement (EUR-OPA)
Council of Europe**

Fighting against environmental degradation and climate change is one of the key priorities of the Strategic Framework for the Council of Europe. At the 4th Summit of the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe held this week in Reykjavik, member States adopted a Declaration “United Around Our Values” in which they underlined the urgency of taking co-ordinated action to protect the environment by countering the triple planetary crisis of pollution, climate change, and loss of biodiversity. The Declaration, which provides guidance for future priorities of the Council of Europe affirms that human rights and the environment are intertwined and that a clean, healthy and sustainable environment is integral to the full enjoyment of human rights by present and future generations.

The Council of Europe, with its longstanding and widely acknowledged track record in protecting the environment, environmentally friendly landscape management and public health, has both the tools and the structures to address human rights and the environment, in the spirit of co-operation and by sharing experience and promising practice.

Already in 1987, the Council of Europe created an instrument to promote governmental co-operation in the field of Disaster Risk Reduction and dealing with emergencies “the European and Mediterranean Major Hazards Agreement (EUR-OPA)”. Today, the Agreement unites 22 member States, among whom are two States that are not member States of the Council of Europe.

The Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (the “Bern Convention”), a unique international instrument aimed at aligning national standards and practices in conserving wild flora and fauna and their natural habitats at pan-European level and beyond, provides the necessary tools to strengthen intergovernmental co-operation and creates an opportunity to civil society to engage with governments and bring to their attention concerns about threats to biodiversity and natural habitats and their detrimental consequences.

The Council of Europe Landscape Convention - the first international treaty devoted exclusively to all dimensions of the landscape – specifies that the landscape has an important public interest role in the cultural, ecological, environmental and social fields and is a key element of individual and social well-being, and that landscape protection, management and planning entail rights and responsibilities for everyone.

The Council of Europe is committed to strengthen its work on the human rights aspects of the environment based on the political recognition of the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment as a human right, in line with United Nations General Assembly Resolution 76/300, *The human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment*, and by pursuing implementation of the Committee of Ministers Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)20 *on human rights and the protection of the environment*. Furthermore, the Council of Europe strives currently to conclude ongoing work on a convention superseding and replacing the European Convention on the Protection of Environment through Criminal Law.

Moreover, the Council of Europe Development Bank has been invited to focus on the social dimensions of climate change and environmental degradation, and to help member States achieve a fair and inclusive transition that leaves no one behind by funding projects in its key sectors of activity, in line with its strategic framework.

The “Reykjavik process” initiated at the Summit aims to strengthen the work of the Council of Europe in the environmental protection field, with the aim of identifying the challenges raised by the triple planetary crisis of pollution, climate change and loss of biodiversity for human rights and contribute to the development of common responses thereto, while facilitating the participation of youth in these discussions.

The EUR-OPA Major Hazards Agreement pays particular attention to the most vulnerable people because disasters affect them more than other groups and create or increase inequalities within our societies. For that reason, EUR-OPA adopted at its Ministerial Meeting in Portugal in 2021, held within the larger framework of the European Forum on Disaster Risk Reduction, two Recommendations: (i) *on Enabling and protecting persons with disabilities during public health emergencies resulting from pandemics* and (ii) *on Inclusion of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in public health emergencies resulting from pandemics*.

The Agreement has equally vigorously promoted gender responsive disaster risk reduction. Natural disasters affect women, men, girls and boys differently. The number of women who die from natural threats is greater than that of men. This is a consequence of women’s unequal socioeconomic status. Additionally, women face different levels of risk and have different coping vulnerabilities and capacities, originated by a series of gender-based political, cultural, and socioeconomic inequalities and differences.

Mindful of the challenges that the most vulnerable persons within our societies face, the Agreement has undertaken this year a reflection on the use of traditional and social media and their use to identify risks and to disseminate information amongst the population on the best practices to prevent disasters from occurring and the measures to take when the disasters do occur. At the next stage the Agreement’s members will consider adopting guidelines and a Recommendation on the use of social media to support national measures for successful disaster risk communication.

The standards elaborated by the EUR-OPA Major Hazards Agreement are useful guidance tools at governments’ disposal, allowing for the elaboration of more fine-tuned strategies and policies that offer better protection to the most vulnerable persons in our societies. I invite you all to take them duly into consideration.