

**Helena Lindberg, Director General of the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency,  
Introductory remarks at Disaster Prevention workshop, Stockholm, 28 July 2009**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to Stockholm and to the beautiful surroundings here at Hasselbacken!

I think I met most of you at the reception last night, but for those who could not attend, I will introduce myself: I am Helena Lindberg, Director General of the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency - in short called MSB.

MSB is a young agency, not new-born, but almost, a steady toddler we could say, born on the 1 January this year. In terms of our responsibilities, however, we are very grown-up. MSB has a broad mandate, ranging from prevention to recovery, in the whole field from everyday accidents to international disasters.

The topic of today's workshop is of great concern to MSB. Prevention is an area of high priority for us, where I believe we have a lot of expertise.

We do everything from stability mapping to keeping a database for natural disasters and holding together the National Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction.

That is why I am very honoured to host this event on behalf of the Swedish Presidency and in close cooperation with the Swedish Ministry of Defence and the European Commission.

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In 2001, when Sweden held the EU Presidency for the first time, we managed to place the issue of conflict prevention high on the political agenda. This time around it is disaster prevention.

The focus is different, but some of the fundamental challenges remain the same.

Preventing misery is often considered a non-gratifying task. And I can agree. There is many times more glamour in responding to occurred events than in quietly making sure they will not happen. But the disasters we are facing are becoming more and more expensive.

With a yearly disaster cost of 15 billion euros, as estimated by the Commission, it seems we can no longer afford not to invest in prevention. And the price tag is likely to increase....

These days we are constantly fed with new information on the effects of climate change. For the Swedish Presidency it is a major priority to spearhead the EU's efforts towards a new climate agreement in Copenhagen. But even if we manage to get global unity behind an ambitious climate treaty, this will hardly deprive us from work.

We are already in a situation where our societies have a tough time coping.

“Water” is an area where the impact of climate change is being felt very acutely. It seems as if we are all struggling right now to adapt the water infrastructure in our cities to the changing weather.

Stockholm is no exception. If you can forgive me for being somewhat boastful about my own capital, I would say that one of the most amazing features about this city, is the strong presence of water. Maybe you have already visited the Old Town and noticed that Stockholm is situated on islands?

However beautiful this water is on a sunny day, it can become a real death-trap on a rainy day. The Slussen locks - which let fresh water from lake Mälaren out into the Baltic – can simply not deal with the high flows and the sea-level rise that we can expect in the not so distant future. In the year 2000, Stockholm was only 5 centimeters away from a massive inundation of the whole underground system.

It does not take a lot of imagination to picture the consequences of central Stockholm under water: the break-down of essential services, the enormous destruction of property, and government ministers wearing life-jackets and wet-suits as they hold their Thursday meeting!

I know that this scenario is being discussed elsewhere. What about “London under water” – the financial capital of Europe. In London you built the Thames Barrier in the early 1980's. It was constructed on the basis of what you knew then. Now you know more about the risks of the future. The tricky question, that we are all tampering with, is how to weigh those risks against the costs of action - and those of non-action.

In the Netherlands this question has different proportions. With two-thirds of the country below sea-level, you need prompt decisions and a lot of creativity. Such as combining prevention with the device “living with water”. You have also cleverly developed the concept of citizen resilience.

But water management is not the only area where we have prevention challenges in Europe. There is also the other extreme. Once again, we have forest fires spreading across the continent and once again we may find our response capacities reaching their limits. The benefits of investing even more in “preventive forecasting”, “vigilance plans” and “fire-break areas” seem obvious.

Besides these natural events we also have other disasters to prevent, that are man-made. Our societies have grown extremely complex and interconnected. We rely upon sophisticated technical infrastructures. In our industries, on our roads and in our laboratories we manage a range of hazardous substances. The margins for mistakes or disruptions are small but the chain-reactions can be significant. The risk for this is greater in situations when the whole of society is under severe strain. A situation we may experience already this fall, with the new influenza.

Finally, we must not forget the international dimension. Disasters happen also outside the EU. Sometimes they even involve EU citizens. The same measures that we need to apply within Europe, to reduce the risk for disasters, are applicable also outside Europe. I see many synergies in combining these two perspectives. Here we also need to join forces between the EU and other international organizations, such as the UN and the Hyogo Framework for Action.

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So what can we do about all this? And above all - what can we do together in the EU - since this is the reason why we are sitting here.

A lot more - is my quick answer. I honestly believe that without a common European approach to these issues we are smoked.

I see three main areas for joint action:

**First of all, we need more knowledge about past disasters and future risks**

In order to put in place clever prevention strategies we need to know more about disasters, their impact and costs. Some of us have national systems for collecting and analyzing such data, but we are not sharing this information as much as we should. I think we could all benefit from a common system that would allow us to exchange and compare this data on a European level.

But we can not only focus on past disasters. I also see the need to look towards the future. A European approach to disaster management should start with an overall assessment of the major risks that the EU is facing. This could include a regional perspective and build on national risk analysis. By establishing such a process of European risk assessment we would have a common point of departure for our future efforts.

My second point concerns **the need to refine the concept of solidarity**

So far, the notion of solidarity has been used mainly in relation to disaster response. We have a solidarity clause, in the still non-ratified Lisbon treaty, which provides a good illustration of this. As I see it, the idea of solidarity is relevant in a wider perspective. We are equally dependent upon each other when it comes to preventing and mitigating major disasters.

But then we must also further refine the concept. Solidarity needs to be more closely linked to national responsibility. We must find new ways of expressing and implementing this responsibility in relation to major risks.

This brings me to my third point and **the need to develop a common European framework for preventing and managing disasters**

Disaster prevention is an area where competences rest at the national level. The diversity among Member States is great. Any attempt to increase EU cooperation must balance collective action against national autonomy, subsidiarity and flexibility. But this would not exclude the use of guidelines and benchmarking, organized as a mutual learning process and a way of comparing best practice.

A crucial area, where we all need to place a lot of effort, is in achieving an integrated, multi-sectoral approach to disaster management. This is often easier said than done. It puts pressure on us to leave the stove-pipes and develop new methods and structures for coordination.

In this and other areas we certainly have a lot to learn from each other.... and we also have a lot of work ahead....

....so let's start right away...

With these words I declare the workshop “open”, and I now leave the floor to Kristina Sundholm who will be our cicerone during this workshop. From what I know of Kristina she will keep us on a steady course and make sure that we achieve all our aims.

Thank you