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Social Awareness of Climate Change Related Risks – Synthesis of Pilot Studies from Central and South East Europe

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As a general trend the frequency and damage caused by extreme climatic events are increasing due to climate change. Adaptation and preparedness have become a crucial issue. Even though climate change affects countries, territories and localities differently, there are common and typical challenges in the Central and South East European region. SEERISK is an EU-funded transnational project concentrating on 6 case study areas in the Middle and Lower Danube Basin (in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia). The social aspect of the project reflects on the awareness and preparedness of inhabitants and institutions in the pilot communities regarding climate change related natural hazards. The aim of the paper is to present the results of the social awareness analyses based on the qualitative research methods of questionnaire survey, semi-structured interviews, analysis of planning documents and the synthesising gap analysis. The questionnaire survey assists to find out as much as possible about the general level of knowledge and preparedness for natural hazards among local inhabitants related to climate change and its consequences on their everyday life. Interviews with local stakeholders and analysis of local planning documents help to understand the institutional level approach in the adaptation to climate change and the preparedness for climate change related natural hazards. The complex situation analysis underpins the identification of insufficiencies considered as gaps between the actual exposure to natural hazards and the level and quality of adaptation and preparedness. All these examinations were consistently carried out on the community level in the pilot areas using the same methodology. Besides the methodological issues an international comparison is presented focusing on the common and specific issues revealed by the empirical research. The surveys commonly showed for the pilots that the awareness and the preparedness of local people to natural hazards are not sufficient, independently from the age groups. Citizens know about the hazards in general; yet they are prone to behave inconsistently in critical situations due to improper information flow. Adaptation to new climatic situations turned out to be very much dependent on the level of education and the financial status. Interviews with stakeholders revealed that they mostly have their own strategies to treat the critical situations, however cooperation is becoming more and more efficient yet, not on the strategic level. In the pilot areas the local planning/development documents pay little attention to the climate change issue. Climate change as a buzzword appears mostly in the analytical part of these documents instead of being taken as a horizontal factor influencing all aspects of urban and rural life. Climate change adaptation strategies are hardly ever built in the urban planning documents or exist independently, partly due to the lack of the national climate adaptation strategies. Gap analysis was

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completed with project level policy recommendations (with adoptable contents) designed for the SEERISK project partners.

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