



Publisher: Scientific-Professional Society for Disaster Risk Management

International Journal of Disaster Risk Management

Journal homepage: <https://internationaljournalofdisasterriskmanagement.com>



Research article

Collaborative Gaps: Investigating the Role of Civilian-Religious Authority Disconnection in Psychosocial Support Provision during the 2014 Floods

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Received: 13 August 2024; Revised: 20 October 2024; Accepted: 18 November 2024; Published: 25 December 2024

ABSTRACT

This study examines the collaborative dynamics between civilian and religious authorities in providing psychosocial support following the 2014 floods in the Sava, Vrbas, and Vrbanja River Basins in the Republic of Srpska / Bosnia and Herzegovina. Through surveys with 275 residents and interviews with civil and religious authorities, a notable pattern emerged: while both groups expressed a mutual desire to work together, a reluctance to initiate collaboration hindered progress. Interviews revealed that each group awaited an invitation from the other, resulting in a standstill despite shared interests in cooperation. The study identifies several underlying reasons for this hesitation. Uncertainties about roles, responsibilities, and communication channels contributed to the impasse, perpetuating a cycle of inaction. Despite recognizing the importance of supporting disaster-affected communities, the absence of proactive outreach from either side sustained the disconnect. This research underscores the significance of addressing these collaborative barriers. It emphasizes the need for clear communication, mutual understanding, and proactive engagement to foster effective collaboration between civilian and religious authorities. By creating an environment conducive to openness and initiative-taking, stakeholders can overcome hurdles and enhance disaster response and resilience efforts. The findings have implications for policymakers, practitioners, and community leaders involved in disaster management. By acknowledging and addressing the challenges inhibiting collaboration, stakeholders can unlock the potential of civilian-religious partnerships to strengthen psychosocial support provision and build more resilient communities in the face of future disasters.

KEYWORDS

Collaboration, civilian, religious authorities, psychosocial support, disaster management

1. Introduction

In May 2014, the Western Balkans, comprising Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Serbia, encountered catastrophic floods triggered by intense cyclonic activity and heavy rainfall. The Sava River Basin, which spans these countries, was severely affected, particularly impacting urban and

rural areas along tributaries like the Vrbas River in Banja Luka (Rajcevic et al., 2016). The floods caused extensive damage across the region, with Bosnia and Herzegovina bearing a significant brunt. Approximately 81 municipalities in Bosnia and Herzegovina were affected, leading to the displacement of 90.000 people, including 60.000 vulnerable children. Tragically, the event claimed 25 lives and caused economic losses amounting to billions of dollars, equivalent to 15% of Bosnia and Herzegovina's GDP (European Commission, 2014; CERF, 2015). Environmental factors such as deforestation and riverbed erosion exacerbated the floods' impact, intensifying vulnerabilities in both urban and rural settings (ICPDR, 2015). Humanitarian operations were quickly deployed in response to the tragedy, with physical healthcare, psychosocial support, livelihood recovery, temporary housing, WASH facilities, protection services for vulnerable people, concerns related to land and house ownership, psychosocial support, and mine action given top priority. Temporary housing, WASH facilities, protection services, and mine action were among the priority areas (European Commission, 2014; CERF, 2015).

The health and social protection sector in the Republic of Srpska responded to natural disasters in 2010 and 2014 by providing psychosocial support to the affected population (Latinović, 2013; 2014). The Ministry of Health and Social Protection responded to floods by reducing illnesses and injuries, and minimizing negative social and economic consequences. In May 2014, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection formed the Team for Coordination of Psychosocial Aid and Support, involving experts from various ministries and non-governmental organizations in the Republic of Srpska (МЗиСЗ РС, 2014). The Team consisted of members from the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, Ministry of Family, Youth, and Sports, Ministry of Education and Culture, Institute of Public Health, Coordination Center for Mental Health, Association of Psychiatrists, Psychological Society and Association of Professional Workers in Social Activities. The Republic of Srpska declared a state of emergency on May 17, 2014, due to an immediate danger of flooding. The Team for Coordination of Psychosocial Aid and Support was formed on May 21, 2014. The formation of this Team on May 21, 2014, indicates a delayed response in organizing preventive actions during the initial phase of disaster management (Марчета, 2021). It was only after this date that an Action Plan with specific measures, activities, and timelines was formulated and executed between May 21, 2014, and May 26, 2014 (МЗиСЗ РС и ДППС, 2015). The first activities were to support Primary Health Care teams in affected municipalities. Psychologists, psychiatrists, and family medicine practitioners were dispatched to various cities, facilitating communication with crisis headquarters, reception centers, hospitals, Primary Health Care centers, Social Welfare Centers, and the Red Cross of the Republic of Srpska. The psychological needs of the affected population were identified, and initial assistance was provided to normalize situations. The events of May 2014 indicate that the system of protection and rescue in the field of psychosocial assistance missed preventive activities for protection and rescue and most of the operational activities (Марчета, 2021). It acted at the time of the risk of danger and carried out operational activities for protection and rescue, that is, activities that are undertaken to eliminate the consequences during the danger and after the end of the danger. Namely, after the disaster, key recovery activities are carried out, i.e. reconstruction and rehabilitation through quick action and recovery measures. The most difficult period for victims occurs after a disaster (Rao, 2006). In this stage of disaster management, the organization of subjects and the mobilization of the forces of the psychosocial assistance system of the Republic of Srpska responded to the requirements (Марчета, 2021).

Natural disasters, such as the catastrophic floods that struck the Sava, Vrbas, and Vrbanja River Basins in 2014 in the Republic of Srpska / Bosnia and Herzegovina, often result in critical psychosocial challenges for affected individuals and communities (Gray et al., 2020; Haroz et al., 2020; ELRHA, 2021; Bangpan et al., 2024). The provision of effective psychosocial support during such crises requires collaboration among various stakeholders, including governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and religious institutions (IASC, 2007; World Health Organization, War Trauma Foundation, & World Vision International, 2011, 2013; Sphere Association, 2018). However, gaps in collaboration and coordination between these entities can hinder the delivery of timely and adequate assistance to those in need (Gray et al., 2020; Haroz et al., 2020; ELRHA, 2021; Bangpan et al., 2024).

While representatives of governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations were actively involved in disaster response efforts as members of the Team for Coordination of Psychosocial Aid and Support in the Republic of Srpska, religious authorities were notably absent from the coordination team (Mapčeta, 2021). This study aims to investigate the collaborative gaps between civilian and religious authorities in psychosocial support provision during the 2014 floods. By examining the perspectives and experiences of residents and representatives from religious communities, governmental agencies, and non-governmental organizations, the research seeks to identify challenges and opportunities for improving collaboration in disaster response efforts.

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to investigate the role of religious institutions in flood disaster management, focusing on the 2014 floods in the Sava, Vrbas, and Vrbanja River Basins in the Republic of Srpska / Bosnia and Herzegovina. By employing a mixed-methods approach, this research aims to provide in-depth insights into the contributions of religious institutions to disaster resilience and recovery, informing more effective and inclusive approaches to disaster management in the future. The research methodology involves conducting surveys with 275 residents from the affected areas and interviews with representatives from governmental and non-governmental organizations, as well as religious institutions. Survey data and interview responses were analyzed to explore the role of civilian-religious authority disconnection in psychosocial support provision during the 2014 floods. This study employs a mixed-methods approach to investigate the role of religious institutions in flood disaster management, focusing on the 2014 floods in the Sava, Vrbas, and Vrbanja River Basins in the Republic of Srpska / Bosnia and Herzegovina. By employing a mixed-methods approach, this research aims to provide in-depth insights into the contributions of religious institutions to disaster resilience and recovery, informing more effective and inclusive approaches to disaster management in the future. The research methodology involves conducting surveys with 275 residents from the affected areas and interviews with representatives from governmental and non-governmental organizations, as well as religious institutions. Survey data and interview responses were analyzed to explore the role of civilian-religious authority disconnection in psychosocial support provision during the 2014 floods.

This paper is structured and consists of five parts. Part one is an introduction. In the second part, methods are presented. The third part contains the findings of research conducted in the period August-December 2020. The fourth part refers to the discussion of the research results, while the conclusion is given at the end.

1.1. Literary review

Natural disasters pose significant challenges to affected communities, not only in terms of physical infrastructure but also regarding the psychological and social well-being of individuals. Effective psychosocial support provision is essential in mitigating the adverse impacts of disasters and promoting resilience among survivors. In times of crisis, individuals often turn to religious institutions for psycho-logical solace and communal support, fostering a positive psychological response that bolsters societal resilience (Cvetković, Romanić, & Beriša, 2023). While existing literature acknowledges the importance of collaboration between civilian and religious authorities in disaster management, there remains a gap in understanding the dynamics of these partnerships and their impact on psychosocial support provision. However, according to the research in Serbia religious rituals strengthen collective identity, and research suggests the need for a stronger focus by religious institutions on disaster preparedness (Cvetković, Šišović; 2024). Moreover, research in Croatia showed that in the context of a clinical approach, psychospiritual treatments could serve as valuable help for persons who need an integrated type of help (Ruter, 2023.)

Civilian authorities, including governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations, play a vital role in coordinating and implementing psychosocial support programs during disasters. They are responsible for providing crisis intervention, counseling services, and community outreach initiatives to address the psychological and social needs of affected populations (World Health Organization, War Trauma Foundation, & World Vision International, 2011, 2013; Sphere Association,

2018). Conversely, religious authorities, such as churches, mosques, temples, and synagogues, serve as central hubs within communities, offering spiritual and emotional support to disaster survivors (Dein et al., 2010; Koenig, 2012; Baidhaw, 2015; JLI, 2022). Religious organizations play a significant role in the recovery phase by offering essential material aid and psychological care to affected populations. Moreover, their messaging during disasters holds critical significance, influencing public perceptions and disaster risk communication strategies (Cvetković, Romanić, & Beriša, 2023). However, the collaboration between these stakeholders is often overlooked in disaster management literature. Collaborative partnerships between civilian and religious authorities are essential for ensuring effective and comprehensive psychosocial support provision during disasters. Studies have shown that coordinated efforts between multiple stakeholders lead to better mental health outcomes for affected populations (Baidhaw, 2015). Religious institutions possess unique strengths, such as deep-rooted community connections and cultural competence, which complement the resources and expertise of civilian authorities (Rahmani et al., 2022). Therefore, leveraging these strengths through collaborative partnerships can maximize the impact of psychosocial support interventions. Despite the potential benefits of collaboration, several challenges exist in establishing and maintaining partnerships between civilian and religious authorities. These challenges include differences in organizational structures, communication barriers, and varying priorities (Dein et al., 2010; Rahmani et al., 2022).

In disaster settings, religious authorities and institutions often serve as pillars of support for affected communities, offering spiritual guidance, comfort, and hope during times of crisis. Religious leaders play a significant role in providing psychosocial support by addressing the emotional and spiritual needs of disaster survivors (Baidhaw, 2015; Cvetković, Romanić, & Beriša, 2023). The involvement of religious authorities in disaster management varies across contexts and is influenced by factors such as cultural norms, religious beliefs, and government policies (Dein et al., 2010; Rahmani et al., 2022). Studies have highlighted the importance of collaboration between civilian and religious authorities in disaster response and recovery efforts. Religious institutions often have extensive networks within their communities, allowing them to reach vulnerable populations and provide essential services (Pargament et al., 2011). Additionally, religious leaders are often viewed as trusted figures, making them valuable partners in delivering psychosocial support programs (Fitchett et al., 2004; Koenig et al., 2012). However, challenges exist in fostering collaboration between civilian and religious authorities. Differences in organizational structures, priorities, and approaches to disaster management can hinder effective partnerships. Moreover, concerns regarding the separation of church and state may influence the extent to which religious institutions are involved in government-led initiatives. Despite these challenges, studies have shown that successful collaboration between civilian and religious authorities can enhance the resilience and well-being of disaster-affected communities (Pargament et al., 2011; Koenig et al., 2012).

Faith-based organizations (FBOs) and religious denominations are crucial in disaster response efforts due to their networks, resources, and commitment to serving communities in need (FEMA, 2013). FBOs provide material assistance, spiritual and emotional support, and mobilize volunteers, donations, and expertise to address community needs (Martin, 2008; Clarke, 2008; Baidhaw, 2015; Borpujari, 2021). They collaborate with secular organizations, government agencies, and other FBOs to maximize their impact. The events that took place in Serbia provide tools for understanding the disaster response capacity of FBOs and produce lessons relevant to the regional contexts. Serbia experienced destructive floods in May 2014 and was also affected, which ruined households, physical systems, and social enterprises. It also, however, laid bare several weaknesses of the disaster response and frustrated the government's efforts to deal with the challenges in certain rural localities (Catholic Relief Services, 2016). In particular, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and Philanthropy (in Serbian: Човекољубље), a charity controlled by the Serbian Orthodox Church, were among the quickest organizations to respond to immediate needs. While CRS's interventions were cash-based, targeted for both immediate assistance and recovery efforts, Philanthropy used its established presence within the Orthodox Christian Church in Serbia to assist target groups well (Catholic Relief Services, 2016). This ensured that aid was allocated in a manner that reflected actual needs thereby closing the divide between government provisions and community expectations.

The inclusion of FBOs in disaster management frameworks is important to enhance community resilience by leveraging regional expertise, customs, and spiritual support networks (Borpujari, 2021). The American disaster relief system is primarily top-down, leading to disaster relief fatigue and requiring local communities to play a larger role. FBOs can include various religious affiliations like Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism (Goldberg, 2015). Religious denominations often have their own disaster relief agencies or networks, mobilizing resources and volunteers for disaster response and recovery (FEMA, 2013). They use their congregations, clergy, and re-sources to provide immediate and long-term assistance to affected communities. Religious institutions have historically provided immediate relief and long-term support in disaster-affected communities, often acting as community hubs. However, they face challenges such as limited resources, capacity gaps in disaster management expertise, and exclusionary practices towards religious minorities or differing belief systems (Borpujari, 2021). Kyoo-Man Ha's study on Korean disaster management (2015) emphasizes the importance of religious beliefs and institutions, particularly Christianity, Buddhism, and Confucianism. It emphasizes the need for cultural adaptations and comprehensive disaster management understanding. The study advocates for collaboration among different religions and effective dissemination of disaster management information. It also warns against competition and conflict among religious groups during disaster recovery. Collaboration between religious denominations, FBOs, and secular organizations is vital for comprehensive aid delivery. Some researches show synergistic benefits from partnerships between these entities, utilizing resources, expertise, and networks to better meet diverse populations' needs (Clarke, 2008; FEMA, 2013; Baidhaw, 2015; Goldberg, 2015; Borpujari, 2021).

Understanding the multifaceted role of religious beliefs in disaster contexts is essential for developing inclusive and effective disaster management strategies that cater to diverse societal needs (Cvetković, Romanić, & Beriša, 2023). Political initiatives that combine theoretical perspectives, advocate for interreligious cooperation, and effectively disseminate disaster management information to local religious institutions need to be encouraged (Ha, 2015). The Circle of Serbian Sisters, Merhamet, and Caritas are a few organizations in Bosnia and Herzegovina that are committed to humanitarian and charitable work; each has a unique mission and cultural context (Савић, 2009; Gavrić, Banović, & Barreiro, 2013; Caritas, 2024). Usually connected to Serbian Orthodox communities and churches is the Circle of Serbian Sisters organization (Савић, 2009). Its main objectives are to support and assist the underprivileged members of the Serbian community through humanitarian endeavors, cultural preservation, and financial assistance for church-related events. Based in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but with operations also in other areas, Merhamet acts as an Islamic humanitarian organization (Gavrić, Banović, & Barreiro, 2013). Its main objective is to offer assistance and support to marginalized populations, such as refugees, internally displaced people, and those impacted by violence. Merhamet's operations include social services, cultural preservation, and humanitarian aid. An international alliance of Catholic groups dedicated to social assistance, development, and relief is called Caritas. It serves those in need, irrespective of their religious or cultural background, by offering development support, disaster relief, and humanitarian help in more than 200 nations and territories worldwide. Caritas concentrates on problems like disaster relief, healthcare, education, and poverty alleviation (Caritas, 2024).

To effectively address the psychosocial needs of disaster survivors, it is necessary to strengthen collaborative partnerships between civilian and religious authorities in disaster management. This can be achieved by formalizing agreements, incorporating religious leaders into decision-making, establishing joint training programs, scheduling meetings, and monitoring partnership effectiveness (Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, 2015; IFRC, 2009, 2018; World Health Organization, War Trauma Foundation, & World Vision International, 2011, 2013). By following these guidelines and taking proactive steps, governments and disaster management agencies can enhance their capacity to provide effective psychosocial support during natural disasters. Effective collaboration between religious institutions, humanitarian organizations, and governmental bodies is crucial for developing comprehensive disaster preparedness, response, and recovery strategies. Religious institutions can also play a vital role in long-term recovery and rebuilding processes, facilitating emotional healing and social cohesion (Borpujari, 2021).

2. Methods

This paper presents findings from a larger research project (Marčeta, 2021) to assess the preparedness of institutions in the Republic of Srpska for providing psychosocial assistance during natural disasters. The research method involved both semi-structured interviews and surveys to gather data from three distinct groups of respondents.

Semi-Structured Interviews: Two intentional samples, groups G1 and G2, were selected for semi-structured interviews. Group G1 comprised experts from various governmental and non-governmental organizations involved in psychosocial assistance and support during the 2014 floods as members of the Team for Coordination of Psychosocial Aid and Support in the Republic of Srpska. The group G2 consisted of representatives of three traditional religious communities operating in the affected areas (the cities of Banja Luka and Gradiška and the municipalities of Čelinac, Laktaši and Kozarska Dubica). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with purposive and deliberate samples of six respondents from group G1 and eight respondents from group G2, respectively. Interview protocols were developed specifically for each group of respondents to guide the conversation and ensure comprehensive data collection.

Surveys: A convenient sample, group G3 was selected for the survey component of the research. The group G3 consisted of a total of 275 residents living in the affected regions during the 2014 floods. The residents of the cities of Banja Luka and Gradiška and the municipalities of Čelinac, Laktaši, and Kozarska Dubica were surveyed using survey questionnaires with combined questions.

2.1. Data Analysis

Qualitative data from semi-structured interviews were analyzed thematically to identify key themes and patterns related to the roles of religious institutions in disaster management and resilience. Quantitative data from surveys were analyzed using statistical techniques to examine residents' perceptions and experiences. Comparative analysis was conducted to triangulate findings from both qualitative and quantitative data sources, providing a comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

3. Results

The first group of respondents (G1) consisted of experts from the relevant field, the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, the Ministry of Family, Youth, and Sports, the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Institute of Public Health, the Coordination Center for Mental Health, the Association of Psychiatrists, the Psychological Society, the Association of Professional Workers in Social Services, who were members of the Team for Coordination of Psychosocial Aid and Support in the Republic of Srpska during the 2014 floods. The Ministry of Health and Social Welfare of the Republic of Srpska issued a Decision on the Appointment of the Team for Coordination of Psychosocial Aid and Support in the Republic of Srpska on May 21, 2014 (M3иC3 PC, 2014). According to the mentioned document, 10 representatives were appointed. It was planned to conduct research with all 10 representatives. However, one respondent was no longer employed, and another was on sick leave at the time of the survey, while two respondents refused to participate in the interview. The research was conducted on an intentional sample of six respondents in September 2020.

The second group of respondents (G2) consisted of representatives of three traditional religious communities operating in the affected areas (the cities of Banja Luka and Gradiška and the municipalities of Čelinac, Laktaši and Kozarska Dubica): the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Eparchy of Banja Luka, the Roman Catholic Church, the Diocese of Banja Luka and the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Majlis of the Islamic Community of Banja Luka. The research was conducted on an intentional sample of eight respondents, during the period from October to December 2020.

The third group of respondents (G3) consisted of residents of Republic of Srpska living in the cities of Banja Luka and Gradiška, as well as in the municipalities of Čelinac, Laktaši, and Kozarska Dubica. A convenient sample of a total of 275 residents was formed, with 55 participants from each of the two cities and three municipalities. The research was conducted between August and October 2020.

3.1 Group G1

Based on the responses gathered from experts involved in the Team for Coordination of Psycho-social Aid and Support in the Republic of Srpska during the 2014 floods, here are the summarized findings regarding the inclusion of a representative of the religious community in the psychosocial support system during natural disasters.

All experts interviewed agreed that a representative of the religious community should be part of the psychosocial support system during natural disasters. They emphasized the authority and influence that religious leaders hold within their communities, which can be instrumental in mobilizing support and care for affected individuals. The involvement of religious communities was seen as indispensable not only for spiritual and moral support but also for accessing material resources through affiliated charitable organizations like the Circle of Serbian Sisters, Merhamet, or Caritas.

Religious representatives were perceived, by experts, as capable of reaching and mobilizing their followers effectively, thereby enhancing community resilience and response. Their inclusion was viewed as essential for fostering solidarity and compassion within communities, which are vital for psychosocial recovery after a disaster.

Moreover, experts advocated for a holistic approach that integrates various stakeholders, including religious leaders, to maximize the effectiveness of psychosocial support initiatives. This approach recognizes the diverse needs of disaster-affected populations and leverages community networks and re-sources for comprehensive support.

The research highlighted a unanimous agreement among experts that integrating a representative of the religious community into the psychosocial support system during natural disasters is beneficial. Their role in providing spiritual guidance, mobilizing resources, and fostering community solidarity was recognized as pivotal for effective disaster response and recovery. This perspective underscores the importance of inclusive and collaborative approaches that leverage community strengths and support mechanisms in times of crisis.

3.2 Group G2

When it comes to the group G2 there were some questions that were analyzed. The first question for a group G2 was: *What is the role of your religious community in reducing the psychological and social effects of natural disasters on individuals and communities in the circumstances of a natural disaster?*

According to the answers, the role of religious communities in reducing the psychological and social effects of natural disasters in the Republic of Srpska is multifaceted and necessary, as highlighted by representatives of traditional religious communities in the region.

Moreover, religious communities are deeply embedded in the daily lives of individuals and communities. They provide both material assistance (such as basic necessities) and advisory support during natural disasters. The familiarity with community members allows religious leaders to address specific needs effectively, offering comfort and reassurance in times of crisis.

However, representatives of three traditional religious groups agreed that during critical times like floods, religious symbols and rituals play a significant role. For instance, the ringing of church bells during floods in 2014 provided emotional support and a sense of solidarity among parishioners. Religious gatherings and joint prayers serve to strengthen the spiritual and emotional resilience of believers, helping them cope with the trauma and uncertainty caused by natural disasters.

Also, religious leaders inform affected individuals about available resources and direct them to relevant public institutions or organizations for assistance. They play a role in educating the community about coping mechanisms and resilience-building strategies in the face of disaster.

At the end, all religious communities collaborate closely with humanitarian and non-governmental organizations to expand support networks and resources. They emphasize the importance of community cohesion and strengthen family ties and relationships to foster a supportive environment for recovery.

Answers showed that specific initiatives, such as psychosocial support teams organized by entities like Caritas of the Banja Luka Diocese, focus on vulnerable groups like the elderly, women, and children, took a place. These teams provide essential psychosocial support aimed at empowering the affected community and promoting long-term well-being through individual and group interventions.

Religious communities in Republic of Srpska play a pivotal role not only in meeting immediate physical needs but also in addressing the profound psychological and social impacts of natural disasters. Their activities are deeply integrated into community life, providing vital support systems during times of crisis. Activities were directed in two directions to material assistance and to advisory support.

The second question for group G2 was: *What were the experiences of your religious community regarding the mentioned role during natural disasters – floods in 2010 and 2014?*

Taking under considerations answers of the religious experts, during the 2010 and 2014 floods in Bosnia and Herzegovina, religious communities played a critical role in disaster response efforts. Despite extensive damage to infrastructure and residential areas, they provided aid and support to those affected.

It is important to notice that the floods highlighted the vulnerability of society but also showcased its resilience and capacity to unite in times of crisis. Religious communities mobilized believers and volunteers to collectively respond to the disasters. These community organizations were the key in mitigating the immediate and long-term consequences of the floods.

However, religious communities actively procured and distributed substantial material aid to those affected by the floods. This aid included essentials such as food, clothing, and other necessities. They managed to reach a significant portion of the affected population, demonstrating their reach and organizational capabilities.

Also, in rural areas particularly, religious communities played a crucial role in organizing assistance for livestock, ensuring that even agricultural needs were addressed amidst the disaster.

All those efforts were largely supported by volunteers from within the religious communities, showing a strong commitment to humanitarian action and community service during crises.

At the end, the response of religious communities during the 2010 and 2014 floods in Bosnia and Herzegovina was characterized by effective mobilization, coordination, and tangible assistance to those in needs. Their positive experiences underscore the importance of community solidarity and the significant role that religious institutions can play in disaster response and relief efforts, complementing the efforts of governmental and non-governmental organizations.

The third question for religious leaders was: *Was the role of your religious community in the circumstances of a natural disaster recognized by relevant authorities (the Team for Coordination of Psychosocial Aid and Support - at the republic level, crisis staff - at the local level)?*

The religious community in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been largely overlooked or disregarded by authorities responsible for coordinating psychosocial support or crisis management. This lack of recognition is attributed to several factors, including the lack of recognition of their efforts and initiatives by the Team for Coordination of Psychosocial Aid and Support at the republic level and crisis staff at the local level. Reasons for that can be found in several factors.

One of the first factors is related to secular nature of the state. Respondents believed that Bosnia and Herzegovina's secular state structure played a significant role. Authorities may have been hesitant to involve religious communities due to concerns about maintaining the separation of religion and state, fearing criticism or condemnation for perceived violations of this principle.

Moreover, the complex political environment in Bosnia and Herzegovina was also cited as a barrier. It was easier for authorities to avoid joint action with religious communities rather than navigate potential political sensitivities and justifications.

Also, there were significant communication challenges between religious communities and governmental authorities. Respondents noted weak communication and loose coordination, which hindered effective collaboration in disaster response efforts.

Despite their contributions, religious communities reported rare expressions of gratitude or acknowledgment from authorities. This lack of recognition further underscored the marginalization of their role in disaster response.

While religious communities actively engaged in disaster response through their own initiatives and efforts, their contributions were generally not integrated or recognized by governmental authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This disconnect highlights significant challenges in fostering effective collaboration between religious and state institutions during crises.

The fourth question for group G2 was: *Should a representative of the religious community be part of the psychosocial support system (the Team for Coordination of Psychosocial Aid and Support in the Republic of Srpska in the circumstances of a natural disaster)?*

The argument bellow strongly supports the inclusion of a religious community representative in the psychosocial support system's Coordination Team during natural disasters in the Republic of Srpska, as it provides essential support and coordination for the community's well-being and recovery.

The natural disasters often trigger religious needs among affected individuals. Regardless of their specific religious affiliation, people may turn to their faith for comfort and support during crises.

Moreover, religious communities have an inherent obligation to assist those in need, including during natural disasters. Their involvement ensures that spiritual and emotional support aligns with the cultural and religious backgrounds of the affected population.

Also, representatives from religious communities are often local residents who understand the community dynamics, cultural norms, and specific needs of the affected population. This local knowledge enhances the effectiveness of psychosocial support efforts.

The answers suggest that the role of the religious community representative should be advisory within the Coordination Team. This implies that their expertise in understanding community needs and providing culturally sensitive support would inform decision-making and implementation strategies.

However, the overarching goal is to provide comprehensive assistance that respects the diversity of religious beliefs and nationalities among the affected population. Including a religious community representative helps ensure that support efforts are inclusive and responsive to all individuals' needs.

The answers argue convincingly that having a representative of the religious community in the psychosocial support system's Coordination Team is beneficial. Their inclusion supports the provision of effective, culturally sensitive, and inclusive assistance during natural disasters.

The last fifth question for group G2 was: *In your opinion, how can, the way your religious community provides psychosocial support in the circumstances of natural disasters, be improved?*

Based on the responses gathered regarding how religious communities can improve their psychosocial support during natural disasters, several key themes emerge.

At the beginning is important to notice that there is a unanimous agreement among respondents on the importance of preventive measures. This includes proactive coordination and cooperation with government mechanisms and local crisis teams. Preventive action is seen as essential not just in mitigating disaster impact but also in enhancing overall preparedness.

Respondents suggest that religious community representatives could play an advisory role within local crisis teams and organizations. Their intimate knowledge of the community and its needs can contribute significantly to effective disaster response strategies.

Also, the strength of religious communities lies in their deep local roots and personal familiarity with community members. Leveraging this knowledge can tailor psychosocial support more effectively to meet individual and community needs during disasters.

However, the emphasis is placed on non-profit activities that directly benefit the community. This contrasts with purely project-based initiatives that may not always address immediate community needs during crises.

Volunteers are highlighted as paramount resources in disaster prevention and response efforts. Mobilizing retired professionals with relevant skills (psychologists, educators, military officers, etc.) is seen as particularly valuable due to their expertise and local knowledge.

Moreover, education is cited as a central preventive measure. By educating the population on disaster preparedness and response, communities can better protect themselves and mitigate the destructive consequences of natural disasters.

These insights underline the potential for religious communities to enhance their psychosocial support capabilities through proactive measures, local engagement, volunteer mobilization, and educational initiatives. Effective collaboration with governmental bodies and a focus on community-specific needs are also seen as critical for improving disaster resilience and response.

3.3 Group G3

The following section will present findings from a survey conducted with residents of the Republic of Srpska, specifically those living in the cities of Banja Luka and Gradiška, as well as in the municipalities of Čelinac, Laktaši, and Kozarska Dubica, during the 2014 floods.

The findings indicate that 22.18% of respondents used self-reliance as a coping mechanism for stress, while 17.45% used family support. None mentioned religion as a coping mechanism, and 0.55% used professional help. The most common combination was self-reliance and family support. The impact of natural disasters was affirmed by 18.18%, with 43.27% identifying them as significant stressors. Despite the potential role of religion in providing coping mechanisms, none mentioned using it. A significant majority (87.63%) acknowledged natural disasters as stressors, indicating a widespread recognition of their psychological impact. The findings highlight the prevalence of individual and familial coping mechanisms in dealing with stress, with a notable absence of religious coping mechanisms.

The results suggest that despite the recognition of the need for diverse forms of psychosocial support during natural disasters, including basic life needs, material aid, healthcare, and psychological support, there is a notable lack of acknowledgment of the role of religious communities in satisfying spiritual needs. The majority of respondents (73.09%) acknowledged a combination of these forms, indicating a holistic approach that considers multiple dimensions of support beyond basic necessities like food and shelter. However, only 2.64% mentioned satisfying spiritual needs, suggesting a potential oversight or underestimation of this component in disaster support systems. The outcomes underscore the need for a comprehensive approach to psychosocial support in the context of natural disasters.

The results reveal that 68.00% of respondents believe that multiple institutions and organizations have an obligation to provide psychosocial support during natural disasters. Crisis management teams and medical institutions are the most prominent in providing this support, with 37.55% of

individual responses and 13.82% of respondents overall believing this is their obligation. Medical institutions have a similar obligation, with 39.06% and 8.00% of respondents recognizing this. Religious communities are acknowledged by 10.52%, but only 0.73% of respondents see them as having an obligation. NGOs are not mentioned as having an obligation. The majority of respondents believe multiple institutions should provide psychosocial support during natural disasters, with crisis management teams and medical institutions being the most prominent.

The findings reveal that religious communities provide psychosocial support to disaster-affected and endangered populations, with 14.91% of respondents stating they always provide such support. However, the majority of respondents are uncertain about whether religious communities provide such support. The role of religious communities in mitigating stress consequences is perceived as very important by 19.27%, while 45.09% consider it important. Despite differing opinions, a majority of respondents believe the role of religious communities is significant, with nearly two-thirds (64.36%) finding it either very important or important.

The outcomes reveals that religious communities are not the primary source of expert assistance in alleviating psychological issues caused by natural disasters, such as the floods of 2010 and 2014. The majority of respondents sought help from family and friends (23.88%), emphasizing the importance of social networks in providing psychosocial support. Other sources of assistance included crisis management teams, family doctors, non-governmental organizations, psychiatrists, and psychologists. While religious communities have a share of 7.79% in requests for expert assistance, this share is relatively small compared to other sources like crisis management teams and family doctors.

4. Discussion

Interviewed members of the Team for Coordination of Psychosocial Aid and Support in the Republic of Srpska have unanimously agreed that involving religious community representatives in psychosocial support systems during natural disasters is essential. They believe that religious leaders possess significant authority and influence within their communities, which can be vital in mobilizing support and care for affected individuals. This aligns with research conducted by Florine De Wolf (2018), which indicated that religion and spirituality play a significant role in psychosocial support activities for individuals affected by humanitarian crises, as a positive relationship exists between religion, spirituality, and psychological well-being. Religious organizations often have established networks and resources, such as charitable organizations like the Circle of Serbian Sisters, Merhamet, or Caritas, which can provide material support during crises. Religious leaders are perceived as effective mobilizers, fostering solidarity and compassion, and contributing significantly to the psychosocial recovery of communities affected by disasters. A holistic approach to support, integrating various stakeholders, including religious leaders, is emphasized, recognizing that different segments of society have distinct needs and strengths. This inclusive approach ensures that the diverse needs of disaster-affected populations are met comprehensively, utilizing existing community networks and support mechanisms effectively.

While three traditional religious organizations differ in their origins, affiliations, and specific areas of focus, they all share a common commitment to humanitarian principles and the alleviation of suffering among vulnerable populations. Each plays an indispensable role in their respective communities and beyond, contributing to global efforts for social justice and humanitarian relief.

Religious communities in Republic of Srpska play an important role in reducing the psychological and social effects of natural disasters. They provide immediate assistance and support, offering material necessities and advisory support. Religious symbols and rituals, such as the ringing of church bells during floods, provide emotional support and a sense of solidarity among parishioners. Religious leaders also provide information and guidance, directing affected individuals to relevant public institutions or organizations for assistance. They educate the community about coping mechanisms and resilience-building strategies during disasters. Similar findings were reported in De Wolff's research (2018), that the best way to implement psychosocial support activities with a religious or spiritual component is to work closely with local religious and spiritual leaders and

communities because these leaders possess a deeper understanding of the context and needs of affected individuals.

Religious communities collaborate with humanitarian and non-governmental organizations to expand support networks and resources, emphasizing community cohesion and strengthening family ties. Psychosocial support teams, organized by entities like Caritas of the Banja Luka Diocese, focus on vulnerable groups like the elderly, women, and children, providing essential psycho-social support to empower the affected community and promote long-term well-being. Their activities are deeply integrated into community life, providing essential support systems during times of crisis.

During the 2010 and 2014 floods in Bosnia and Herzegovina, religious communities played a crucial role in disaster response efforts. They mobilized believers and volunteers to collectively respond to the disasters, mitigating the immediate and long-term consequences. Religious communities distributed substantial material aid, including essentials like food and clothing, to those affected. They also provided support in rural areas, organizing assistance for livestock and addressing agricultural needs. Volunteer efforts from religious communities largely supported these efforts, demonstrating a strong commitment to humanitarian action and community service during crises. The response of religious communities during these disasters was characterized by effective mobilization, coordination, and tangible assistance to those in need. These experiences highlight the importance of community solidarity and the significant role religious institutions can play in disaster response and relief efforts, complementing the efforts of governmental and non-governmental organizations.

The role of religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina during natural disasters is generally not recognized by authorities at the republic and local levels. Factors contributing to this lack of recognition include the secular nature of the state, political dynamics, communication and coordination issues, and the lack of recognition of their efforts. The secular state structure in Bosnia and Herzegovina may have prompted authorities to avoid involving religious communities due to concerns about maintaining the separation of religion and state. Communication and coordination issues between religious communities and governmental authorities were also noted as significant barriers. Despite their efforts, religious communities reported receiving little gratitude from authorities. Their active involvement often went unrecognized, and their contributions were not integrated into government responses, underscoring the challenges of fostering effective collaboration between religious institutions and state authorities during crises. These findings may confirm earlier research by Hirono and Blake (2017), who concluded that clergy should collaborate among themselves and with other professionals in natural disaster relief efforts, and that collaborative efforts between mental health professionals may also be needed health and clergy.

The inclusion of a religious community representative in the psychosocial support system's Coordination Team during natural disasters is highly beneficial. This is because it recognizes religious needs, ensures community assistance, and enhances the effectiveness of psychosocial support efforts. Religious community representatives are often local residents who understand community dynamics and cultural norms, which enhance the effectiveness of psychosocial support efforts. Their advisory role informs decision-making and implementation strategies, and their expertise in understanding community needs and providing culturally sensitive support informs decision-making and implementation strategies. Additionally, their inclusion ensures comprehensive assistance that respects the diversity of religious beliefs and nationalities among the affected population, ensuring that support efforts are inclusive and responsive to all individuals' needs.

The findings reveal that religious communities can improve their psychosocial support during natural disasters through several key themes. Preventive action is critical, including proactive coordination with government and local crisis teams. The current initiative titled "Strengthening Resilience to Natural Disasters and Improving Preparedness Strategies" (PREPS) also attests to the involvement of FBOs in regional disaster response. It was initiated in 2014 in Bosnia and Herzegovina by CRS, in cooperation with Caritas Serbia and Philanthropy in Serbia, with the goal of strengthening community resilience against the impact of natural hazards. With support from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), this project's emphasis lies in local government capacity building, civil protection unit creation, trainings, and preparation of regulatory acts (Caritas Srbije, 2024). It also responds to the local conditions, especially in those areas, which were pinpointed to be

especially fragile to the impact of natural disasters, where improving the protective measures posed considerable advancement. The project started in 2014 and was able to implement its first phase recently. The objective of the second phase of the PREPS project, which is presently underway, is the enhancement of the capacities of 16 municipalities, including 10 in Serbia and 6 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, for the management of disaster risk reduction (Caritas Srbije, 2024).

Religious community representatives can play an advisory role, leveraging their deep local roots and personal familiarity with community members. Additionally, other research shows that psycho-spiritual support and care services are crucial for diminishing long-term adverse psychological impacts following a disaster (Saidon et al., 2020). Non-profit activities that directly benefit the community are preferred, as they address immediate community needs. Volunteerism is emphasized as a valuable resource in disaster prevention and response efforts, especially for retired professionals with relevant skills. Education is also a central preventive measure, as it educates the population on disaster preparedness and response. These insights suggest that religious communities can enhance their psychosocial support capabilities through proactive measures, local engagement, volunteer mobilization, and educational initiatives. Collaboration with governmental bodies and focusing on community-specific needs is also essential for improving disaster resilience and response.

The outcomes highlight the prevalence of individual and familial coping mechanisms in natural disasters, but a significant lack of religious coping mechanisms among respondents. Despite their potential benefits, religious coping mechanisms are underutilized in disaster response strategies. The results suggest that integrating religious support more effectively into disaster response strategies could lead to more comprehensive and inclusive approaches to psychosocial support. While crisis management teams and medical institutions are recognized for their obligation to provide psychosocial support during natural disasters, there is room for broader recognition and integration of other stakeholders, particularly religious communities, in disaster response frameworks. The findings suggest a dual narrative: while religious communities recognize the potential impact and importance of psychosocial support, there is a need for clearer understanding and visibility of their contributions. Increased engagement and integration of religious communities into disaster response structures could maximize their potential benefits in providing psychosocial support to affected populations.

Strengthening collaboration between civilian and religious authorities in disaster management is essential for addressing the psychosocial needs of disaster survivors. This can be achieved through formal agreements, religious leaders' involvement, joint training programs, and monitoring effectiveness. De Wolf (2018) also suggests the need for training local religious and spiritual communities and leaders to respond to the psychosocial needs of individuals in provision of a humanitarian crisis, while respecting humanitarian ethics. The partnership between CRS and Philanthropy demonstrates the important function of FBOs involvement in regional relief work. The last ten years have shown both the benefits and challenges of working towards a common goal of collaboration among government entities, local authorities and FBOs in disaster response. There are still issues around recognition and inter-agency working, but initiatives like PREPS, however, show the positive side of such collaborations.

5. Conclusions

The research reveals unexpected support from religious organizations in disaster recovery after the 2014 floods in the Sava, Vrbas, and Vrbanja River Basins in Republic of Srpska / Bosnia and Herzegovina. The study emphasizes the vital role of religious organizations in disaster management, especially when local and national authorities did not involve them. The research findings highlight the significant involvement of traditional religious communities in mitigating the psychological and social impacts of natural disasters. They show a dedication to helping others in need, motivated by conviction rather than self-interest, via their proactive activities and extensive support. Nevertheless, there is a need for more institutional acknowledgment and incorporation into official disaster response frameworks, as this involvement is frequently disregarded. By fostering closer collaboration between religious organizations and disaster management structures, communities can benefit

from a more effective approach to disaster resilience and recovery. Clarifying roles, improving coordination, and increasing awareness are essential steps toward leveraging the capabilities of religious institutions in disaster management.

The support systems appear fragmented, lacking clear coordination and delineation of responsibilities. While religious communities are recognized as potential providers of psychosocial support, there's ambiguity regarding their roles and obligations, hindering effective collaboration. Despite recognition, religious support services are underutilized compared to other sources of assistance, indicating potential barriers to access during crises. Collaboration among stakeholders, including religious institutions, is crucial to enhancing the effectiveness of psychosocial support systems in disaster management. While governmental and non-governmental entities undoubtedly play indispensable roles in disaster response and recovery, the inclusion of religious representatives is essential. By acknowledging and leveraging the strengths of religious organizations and leaders, disaster response frameworks can better meet the diverse needs of affected populations and promote sustainable recovery and resilience.

Addressing collaborative gaps between civilian and religious authorities requires proactive measures to bridge differences, establish formal partnerships, and leverage religious resources effectively. By doing so, disaster management efforts can become more inclusive, culturally sensitive, and ultimately more resilient in the face of future challenges.

Author Contributions: The following actions were undertaken by the research team members: project conceptualization and execution, questionnaire dissemination and data collection Ž.M.; data analyze and interpretation and theory development, Ž.M. and D.J.; writing – original draft preparation, Ž.M.; writing – review and editing, Ž.M. and D.J.; while D.J. critically reviewed the data analysis and contributed to the content for revising and finalizing the manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Acknowledgments: The authors express their gratitude to the anonymous reviewers for their comments, as well as to the participants of this study, whose willingness to share their experiences added depth and richness to this research.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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