



THE TIMES PROJECT, SPONTANEOUS VOLUNTEERING IN CESENA

Together beyond the flood: the participatory
process towards an adaptation strategy



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094455

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A glimpse into the future

Enzo Lattuca - Mayor of Cesena

The May 2023 flood showed us how urgent and necessary it is to rethink the climate crisis and preparation for future emergencies, not only as a challenge to be faced, but also as an opportunity for social cohesion. The TIMES project has allowed us to lay the basis for this cultural and governance change, connecting the experiences, skills, needs of the civil society, the Municipality, and the Civil Protection System that emerged during the flood. TIMES represents the beginning of a journey that will continue by placing the local community and the volunteer network at the center as a fundamental civic resource to be strengthened in “peacetime”, nurtured through integrated and ongoing training programs, and brought into dialogue with institutions through accessible communication tools. TIMES points the way toward rethinking resilience as an opportunity for collective growth.

TIMES: KEY ELEMENTS



“The most positive memory I carry with me is sharing. Children who encouraged adults; their smiles that never faded. We cooked and they brought joy”

The catastrophic flood that hit the Emilia-Romagna region in May 2023 was the most serious in recent decades, affecting 44 municipalities. The flood directly impacted over 8,000 residents, displaced 252 families and damaged more than 350 businesses in Cesena alone. At the same time, however, an extraordinary wave of spontaneous volunteering emerged - especially among young people - organized through informal communication channels.

The project

TIMES (Technology and Innovation for Maps of Emergency Social resilience) is one of the 10 pilot cases of the European project FutuResilience which aims to strengthen economic and social resilience in Europe, by improving the capacity to respond to future crises and fostering the use of existing research and innovation tools.

The project was led by the Municipality of Cesena acting as leader, with Fondazione IU Rusconi Ghigi and ANCI Emilia-Romagna as partners.

Specifically, this project focused on three strategic areas: Civil Protection, community and social wellbeing, and digital and communication tools. By applying the foresight methodology, the project aimed to address two main challenges:

1. Strengthen local community resilience and preparedness to better respond to future adverse events, by developing a system of accessible and inclusive digital and analogue communication tools, together with new

skills related to mutual aid and psychological support to cope with emergencies.

2. Establish an effective governance framework to improve the capacity of the Civil Protection system to engage, manage and communicate with spontaneous volunteers, improving coordination between citizens and the Civil Protection and bridging the perceived and actual gaps among the different stakeholders involved in emergency situations.

In short, the project aimed to create an ecosystem of solutions for progressive adaptation, thus going beyond the management of extreme events in a purely emergency perspective.

FROM INNOVATION TO PRACTICE



Starting from a real experience - the flood that hit the city of Cesena in May 2023 - the project represented an occasion to demonstrate how an extreme event can be transformed into an opportunity to build more resilient communities through participation and dialogue between different local actors and citizens.

From the beginning, the participatory process was based on three key elements: the involvement of both those who managed the emergency and those affected by the flood, the centrality of emotions, and the systemic approach adopted.

1. The participatory approach

The TIMES project was characterized by a participatory approach that involved local actors right from the very beginning, starting with the listening phase.

In fact, the questionnaire was used to collect information from those who had direct experience of the flood and its consequences in order to gather useful data for defining the project's directions and mapping the perceived critical issues. The themes that emerged were then explored in greater depth through interviews and focus groups with specific local actors. The participatory process continued with the Infoday with the mapping of places and positive memories, and went on to the co-design and validation of solutions. The use of envisioning techniques, such as newspaper articles, and working in thematic group work made it possible to explore desirable future scenarios and define how they could function across three operational phases: peacetime, emergency and post-emergency.

2. The centrality of emotions

When a community experiences a catastrophic event, such as the flood hitting the city of Cesena, emotions become a theme that cannot be ignored. In line with what emerged

throughout the interviews and workshops, this stresses the crucial role of psychological support during and after emergencies. For this reason, emotions represented the common thread of the entire process, from the data collection for the questionnaire to the various workshops. Moreover, at the end of the final workshop, participants were asked what emotions and sensations they would expect to feel in Cesena in 2050.

If, during the emergency in May 2023, the main emotions experienced were *fear, anguish, worry, impotence and disbelief*, in a future Cesena that has implemented an adaptation strategy, they would instead be *trust, awareness, preparation and safety*.

3. The ecosystem of solutions and actors

Another strength of the project lies in the fact that the solutions that emerged were conceived as part of a single adaptation system, making them interdependent and connected with the various actors across the different operational phases (peacetime, emergency, and post-emergency). It is important to view the solutions as part of a system rather than in isolation. Furthermore, the collaboration between the Public Administration, Civil Protection, volunteers, associations and citizens is crucial for the entire system to function. For these reasons, the validation of the designed solutions, supported by the creation of system maps, has highlighted the interconnections and operational dynamics between the various actors and the co-designed solutions.

THE PARTICIPATORY PROCESS



As part of the engagement strategy, the participatory process included an initial phase of context-framing, carried out through an online questionnaire - to which 142 people responded - and 4 focus groups involving people affected by the flood, associations, teachers and public employees. An Infoday was also organized, followed by an internal technical meeting with some municipal employees and Civil Protection System staff, aimed at identifying possible

scenarios to guide the development of collective solutions in collaboration with the community.

These activities represented the first phase of the TIMES participatory process, and were followed by 3 workshops held between December 2024 and February 2025, with the respective objectives of framing the context and sharing experiences, co-designing collective solutions, and validating them.

In the following pages, each phase of the participatory process will be detailed, identifying its objectives and strategies.

Data collection

To better understand the context and deal more effectively with the challenges arisen during the flood, data collection was conducted through interviews, focus groups and an online questionnaire.

The interviews and focus groups took place between May and June 2024, involving several key actors such as employees of the Municipality of Cesena, members of the Civil Protection, some neighborhood presidents, associations and teachers.

These stakeholders played different roles during the emergency, such as managing spontaneous volunteering, communicating with citizens and distributing material goods.

The aim of the interviews and focus groups was to map the resources activated during the emergency, the digital and communication

tools used, the solutions adopted, the obstacles encountered and what facilitated overcoming them, and finally the emotional burden. In addition, together with the associations, we also investigated the relationship with their neighborhood and whether it had changed since before the flood.

From these interviews and focus groups, valuable insights emerged regarding the solutions implemented during the emergency phase, as well as the critical issues and obstacles encountered in managing and coordinating the various actors involved. Among the positive aspects identified were:

- the **essential role of associations**: some have seen an increase in membership after the emergency;
- the **SOS volunteers platform** which supported and facilitated the management of spontaneous volunteering;
- the great availability and **spirit of initiative** shown by spontaneous volunteers;
- the importance of **local landmarks** such as the Don Milani school and Oltresavio, Ravennate and Fieristico headquarters districts, used as a point for the accreditation and sorting of volunteers.

Some of the critical issues detected were instead:

- the complexity of **emotional management**: there was a lack of structured psychological support for both those who managed the volunteers and the employees of the Municipality;

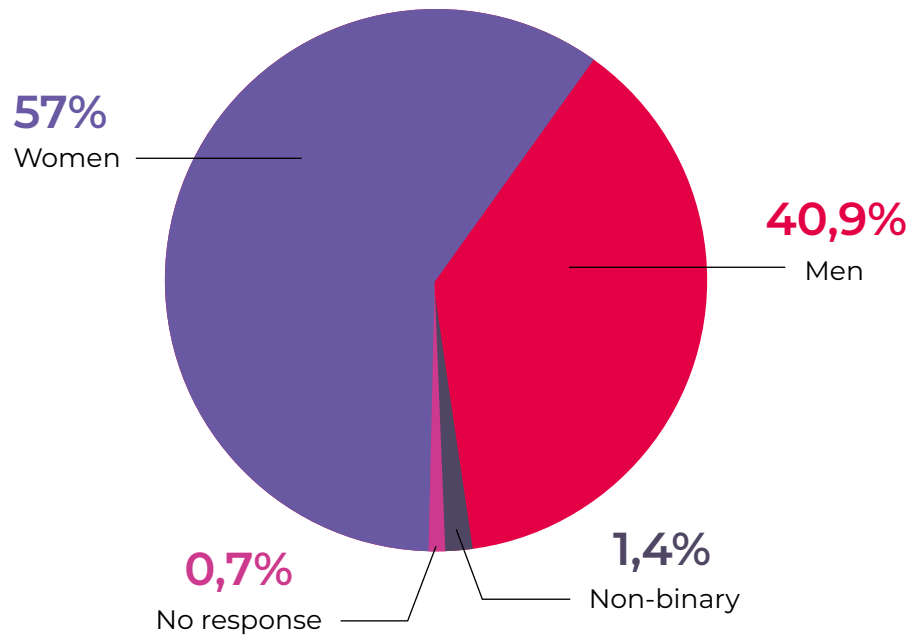
- the difficulty of **managing spontaneous volunteering** in a coordinated manner;
- a difficult **coordination between the various municipal bodies**.

The online questionnaire, shared with the local community, was also part of the data collection process on spontaneous volunteering and was structured into the following sections:

1. Emotions and memories of the 2023 flood
2. Volunteering experience during the 2023 emergency
3. New skills acquired
4. Communication tools and informal networks resources (online and offline)
5. Volunteering experience before and after the flood

The following page reports some of the main results emerged.

RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS



SPONTANEOUS VOLUNTEERING

80%

Nersly 80% of volunteers participated as individuals, rather than as members of an association.

PLACES OF INTERVENTION

55%

volunteers intervened where there was greatest need for help, moving around different city's streets and areas

34,6%

of the remaining responses concerned interventions in numerous specific locations

20,4%

some of the responses concerned interventions at the Don Milano School

RISK PERCEPTION

17%

Stated that they felt they had put themselves in danger, mainly due to the lack of adequate protective equipment.

COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

Individual and groups chats

Best for coordinating volunteering activities

Institutional channels, word-of-mouth and neighbourhood networks

Essentials for receiving updates

Finally, the questionnaire also investigated the emotional aspect, asking about the emotions felt at the beginning of the flood and those felt during the volunteering experience. In the first case, the most common emotions were all negative: *fear, anguish, worry, disbelief, impotence, sadness*, but also *dismay, terror, anxiety*.

In the second case, on the contrary, the emotions felt during the volunteering experience were more positive. Although sadness and anger were among the emotions most frequently felt, other emotions experienced during volunteering included *joy, surprise, solidarity, happiness, hope, gratitude, and pride, etc.*

The theme of emotions and sensations experienced by people was central throughout the project, and it was revisited both during this data collection process and in subsequent workshops.

Infoday

The participatory process was launched on October 10, 2024, with a public Infoday aimed at creating a community map and beginning a shared narrative of the spontaneous volunteering experience during the May 2023 flood in Cesena.

The event opened with an evocative theatrical performance by Mara Moschini and Marco Cortesi, entitled “Fango” (“Mud”). This reading aloud, based on stories of the May 2023 flood with a positive ending, was also functional for subsequent activities.

After the theatrical reading, the participants shared their memories of the flood by writing on

a postcard a positive memory of an experience lived in those days. By working on the themes of community resilience and emergency psychology, it was possible to build a narrative of the lived experience.

Subsequently, a mapping was conducted of the places that served as reference points for the volunteer network during the emergency, providing support to citizens. These places - public and private, formal and informal - were identified by participants on three large maps of the areas of Cesena most affected by the flood: Oltresavio-Centro, Ravennate and Dismano.

Participants moved freely from one map to another, writing the reference places on post-its and placing them on the corresponding map. For each place or subject identified, they then filled out a specific sheet to describe the type of support provided, the role played during the emergency and how they had got in touch with that subject or space.

These cards were then placed on a panel to analyze the levels of closeness and relationships that were created during the emergency, representing a key moment to better understand the collaborative dynamics emerged.

Following this first moment of engagement and discussion with the citizens and stakeholders involved, a technical meeting was held within the Municipality of Cesena, aiming at identifying possible working tracks to be explored in three following workshops. The discussion between employees of the Municipality of Cesena and

members of the Civil Protection began based on the data collected during the context framing phase and the mapping carried out during the Infoday.

This comparison then led to the identification of 5 themes to focus on:

1. Management of spontaneous volunteering
2. Communication between the Municipality and the networks of informal places
3. Communication and collection of assistance requests between the Municipality and citizens
4. Support and logistics for spontaneous volunteering
5. Training for volunteers and citizens



First workshop: sharing experiences

The first Lab's workshop opened with a presentation of the results from the questionnaires. In particular, the session shared findings related to the emotions experienced at the onset of the flood and during the volunteering activities. Participants were then asked, via Mentimeter, to indicate the emotions they felt at the beginning of this process. The most frequently reported emotions included *curiosity, hope, solidarity, enthusiasm, trust, and a sense of participation*.

The first workshop had two main objectives:

1. to engage the community more actively in the project objectives, through the co-creation of "desirable" futures;
2. to validate and expand the mapping of community experiences started during the Infoday on October 10.

To achieve the first objective, the "*newspaper article from the future*" tool was used, an envisioning technique that stimulates participants to imagine and share a common vision on certain topics through a positive and collaborative approach.

Based on the 5 key themes identified during the internal technical meeting, participants worked in groups to create a newspaper article. Each group was given a theme and challenged to envision themselves in Cesena in 2050, during a hypothetical future flood.

The aim of the instrument was to create a news article depicting a positive change related to

the assigned theme, allowing participants to visualize the progress and positive impact of the proposed solutions.

Divided into groups of up to five people, participants were provided with a thematic sheet describing the context of the 2023 flood, followed by a series of guiding questions designed to stimulate brainstorming and steer the discussion towards a desirable future. The key themes addressed were:

- **management of spontaneous volunteering:** how to manage groups of spontaneous volunteers by leveraging their skills and promoting their perception of safety;
- **communication between the Municipality and the networks of informal places:** how to strengthen communication between the Public Administration and the network of informal community places – online and offline;
- **ommunication and collection of assistance requests between the Municipality and citizens:** how to make the Public Administration's communication system more effective towards citizens;
- **support and logistics for spontaneous volunteering:** how to organize logistics to support spontaneous volunteering during emergencies;
- **training for volunteers and citizens:** how to develop a community training system during peacetime to prepare for future crises.

Each theme also stimulated the group with specific questions addressing accessibility in terms of language, gender, intercultural and intergenerational inclusion, digital divide, as well as considerations for people with disabilities.

The newspaper article writing activity was divided into several phases. First, each participant individually answered the inspirational questions by writing their ideas on post-its. Then, each participant's ideas were shared within the group and a discussion began to outline the desirable future. Once the discussion was over, each group wrote their article on a blank newspaper page, summarized the key points in the subtitle, and created an impactful title representing their shared vision of a desirable future. The titles of the six desirable futures that emerged were:

- "Cesenaplus: AI Volunteers is online";
- "Training, communication, collaboration: volunteers take to the field";
- The European Award for the Best Communicating City to the Municipality of Cesena";
- "The new COMUNYTAPP is born: for an accessible and inclusive communication";
- "Optimal organization of the emergency in Cesena!";
- "Active and ready citizens".

The second goal of the meeting was to validate and, where possible, expand the mapping of community experiences started during the Infoday. After the feedback of what was written in the newspaper articles, participants had

the opportunity to enrich the three maps with new reference points that played a crucial role in supporting the emergency response. The integration of community experiences also involved integrating the postcards completed during the Infoday with new positive memories related to the volunteering experience.

Finally, before concluding the workshop, participants were asked how they would feel imagining themselves in a future in which the city had implemented an effective strategy to deal with potential future floods. The most frequently reported emotions were: *safe, confident, calm, aware, prepared and protected.*



Second workshop: co-designing solutions

The second workshop of the project focused on four project ideas that emerged from newspaper articles produced during the first meeting. To allow the correct execution of this new activity, the project team met between the first and second workshops to refine the six desirable futures, grouping them into the following four project ideas.

1. **Single portal** for managing spontaneous volunteering and leveraging volunteers' skills, while promoting the perception of safety;
2. **Logistics hubs** for organizing support and resources for volunteers during emergencies;
3. **Communications tools** to strengthen the interaction between the Public Administration and the network of informal community places;
4. **Integrated training program** to develop effective community preparedness for future crises.

This second workshop aimed to delve deeper into the characteristics of the four project ideas reported above and define their functioning during different moments: in peacetime, during the emergency and in the post-emergency.

After a brief summary of the path and the presentation of the project ideas, participants were divided into four working groups, each dedicated to a specific idea.

The meeting was structured around three steps:

- a. needs and skills analysis
- b. solution ideation
- c. definition of how the project idea works

a. Need and skills analysis

Each group chose three community protagonists from the seven fictional figures available:

- Giuseppe Perli, elderly person living alone (87 years old);
- Fathima Diop, person of foreign origin (35 years old);
- Matteo Ricci, university student (28 years old);
- Donatella Raggi, third sector volunteer (62 years old);
- Michele Lorusso, young man with motor disabilities (43 years old);
- Sofia Severi, minor (13 years old);
- Patrizia Casati, visually impaired person (52 years old).

Once the community protagonists were selected, the group was divided into three subgroups to carry out the analysis of the needs and skills of the selected protagonist in relation to the group's project idea. For each selected protagonist, the participants completed a form that included:

- his or her favorite phrase and the perception that others have of him or her, useful for putting yourself in another person's shoes and understand their perspective;
- specific needs with respect to the project idea;
- skills, what she/he can do, what she/he knows

and what she/he could put at disposal with respect to the project idea.

This activity helped us understand how to make project ideas more inclusive, accessible and better responsive to community needs.

b. Solution ideation

After the needs and skills analysis, the groups focused on structuring their project idea in three key steps:

- summarize the main features of the project ideas that emerged from the previous activity to address the needs of the community and the identified community protagonists;
- identify the fundamental elements of the project solution, based on the characteristics identified;
- explore any opportunities already presented in the territory capable of facilitating the project idea implementation

c. Definition of how the project idea works

In this last activity, the groups outlined the concrete functioning of their project idea in three operational moments: in peacetime, during the emergency and post-emergency.

In addition to the various functions envisaged, participants also identified materials and immaterial resources necessary to guarantee the effectiveness and the actual functioning of the project idea in each single phase.

At the end of this last activity, each group presented their idea in plenary. During this

moment of feedback, a spokesperson for each group shared the characteristics and elements that made up their project idea and its functioning in the three different moments.



Third workshop: Validation of solutions



The last meeting of the participatory process was dedicated to the validation of the project solutions that emerged from the previous workshops.

The aim was in fact to assess the solutions as if they were already part of an integrated emergency response system for extreme events of the Municipality of Cesena.

The meeting began with a summary of the process up to that point, reviewing

the activities and results of the previous workshops, and introducing the two restitution meetings scheduled for the following months. Subsequently, the four project solutions defined in the second workshop were presented, detailing their main characteristics and their functioning in the three operational moments identified: in peacetime, during the emergency, and post-emergency.

Participants were divided into six groups, each representing a key actor who had a role in or was affected by the 2023 flood. The assignment to a particular group depended on which actor most closely reflected their own experience during the flood or aligned with their perspective. The six actors were:

- **Municipality of Cesena;**
- **Civil Protection;**
- **Volunteer;**
- **Person in difficulty due to the extreme event;**
- **Associations;**
- **Specialist unit contact person.**

Each group received two booklets containing a detailed summary of the characteristics and functioning of the design solutions across the three operational phases (instructions for use). The activity consisted of reviewing up the solutions and discussing within the group how these would be used by their actor, as well as the role the actor could play in relation to the functioning of each solution. This analysis was conducted by considering the

solutions as a whole within each operational moment (pre, during and post-emergency).

Finally, the group reflected on what factors could determine success or failure for their actor, addressing the following questions:

- What elements could lead to a system **failure**?
- What factors could instead ensure the **success** and satisfaction of your actor?

The aim of this phase was to highlight the most influential and determining factors in the functioning of the entire system. At the end of the activity, each group presented their analysis in the plenary session, highlighting the role and use of each actor in relation to the different solutions and operational moments.

During this last phase of work, a visual summary of the findings was created through three system maps - one for each operational phase - to illustrate the relationships between the actors and the design solutions.

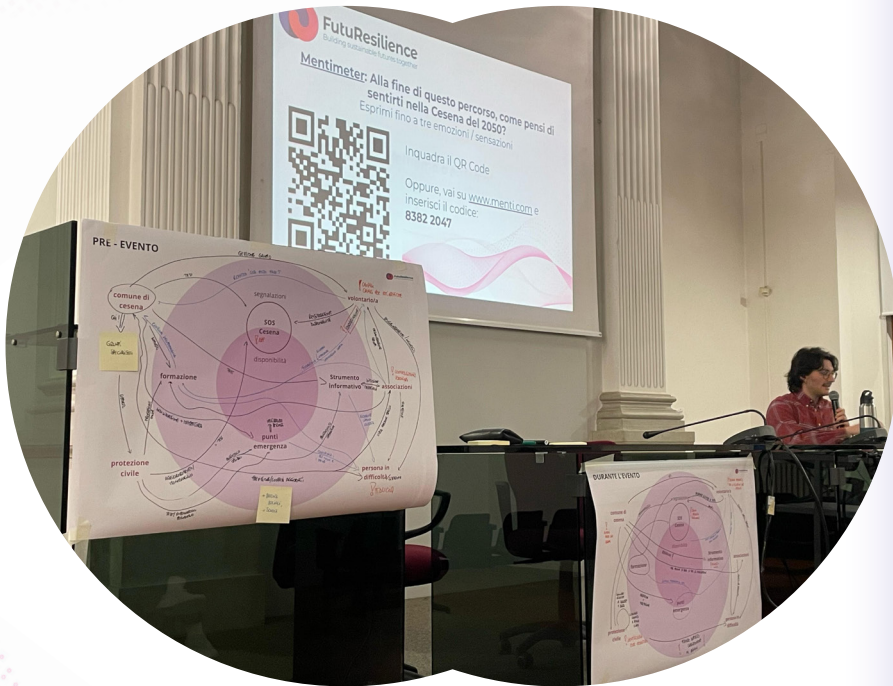
Following the restitution, the topic of emotions was revisited. Building on the questions posed in the initial questionnaire and the first workshop, participants were asked: at the end of this journey, how do you think you will feel in Cesena in 2050?

The most frequently reported emotions were very similar to those observed in the first workshop: *aware, confident, sure, prepared, informed, etc.*

REPLICABILITY AND CONCLUSIONS

Following the experience of the 2023 flood, certain factors that shaped the collective response to the emergency can serve as opportunities to leverage past experience and ensure that the community can respond effectively in the future. From this perspective, it is possible to recognize useful elements not only to better manage a similar disaster should it occur again in the Cesena area, but also to address different types of disasters that require the same level of community engagement. For example, in the event of a sudden, strong earthquake, the cohesive strength of the local ecosystem - tested during the flood and reinforced through the TIMES project - could provide a ready system for communication and volunteer organization that can be mobilized quickly, just as it could be activated in the case of a snowstorm or other calamities. A solid network of local actors, both institutional and non institutional, clearly defined and equipped reference points as “logistics hubs”, and a linear, accessible and multi-channel communication system are among the characteristics of the solutions developed. These features ensure that the system can adapt to multiple different situations.

Like Cesena, many other territories in Italy are increasingly facing extreme disasters. Therefore, it becomes important to be able to identify the elements of the participatory process



that make it replicable elsewhere, allowing other communities to develop experiences of generative resilience on a larger scale. The willingness of the local administration to review its structures and tools, with the goal of making them increasingly accessible to citizens and more resilient to climate and social challenges, is a key factor. Equally important is the engagement of various actors in a territory. Whether structured organizations or individuals committed to supporting their environment and community, their participation in collective reflection sessions, along with openness to guidance from those managing the participatory process, is essential for defining new design solutions. These elements are crucial to ensuring the replicability of a project like TIMES in other territories facing similar challenges.

CREDITS

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A special thanks goes to all those who, during the May 2023 flood, dedicated their time and energy to helping those in need, giving rise to the remarkable movement of solidarity known as spontaneous volunteering.

We also extend our heartfelt thanks to all those who participated in the meetings, contributing their ideas and perspectives to shape concrete solutions for the future and leaving a legacy of commitment to being increasingly ready and prepared.

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