AT A GLANCE

Requested by the REGI committee

The Use of Cohesion Policy Funds in Disaster Response and Recovery

See the full study

Key findings

In recent years, the European Union has faced an increasing number of natural disasters, including floods, wildfires, droughts, landslides, earthquakes and cyclones (in the EU's outermost regions). Climate change is expected to further intensify both the frequency and severity of these events. While civil protection and disaster risk management remain primarily Member State competences, the EU plays a key supporting role by coordinating, complementing and reinforcing national actions through common frameworks, financial instruments and technical assistance.

To strengthen resilience, the EU has developed a range of policies and tools, including the Floods Directive, the EU Adaptation Strategy, the Copernicus Emergency Management Service, the Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM) and the European Union Solidarity Fund (EUSF).

The EU Cohesion Policy also plays an important role, particularly in relation to prevention and resilience. Approximately EUR 17,943 million or 4.5% of the total budget for the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the Cohesion Fund (CF), and the Just Transition Fund (JTF) has been planned for climate change adaptation and risk management in the 2021–2027 programming period. This remains a relatively low share of the total, although the percentage varies across countries. The supported interventions focus on climate change adaptation and the prevention of floods and landslides.

Several changes were introduced in Cohesion Policy in 2021–2027 compared with the previous programming period. For example, the Regional Emergency Support to Reconstruction (RESTORE) allows greater flexibility in financing post-disaster rebuilding. As of September 2025, approximately EUR 1.6 billion has been allocated to RESTORE, across five countries and 14 programmes.

Despite the policy's evolution, the analysis carried out in this study, based on a literature review, a survey of Managing Authorities, and case studies and interviews, confirms that Cohesion Policy combines strengths and weaknesses. The former include a positive contribution to preparedness and resilience (e.g. through protective infrastructures, risk mapping tools, governance improvements, and nature-based solutions), long-term and predictable funding, increasing flexibility, and innovation. Areas for improvement mainly include slowness and administrative complexity, which make the Policy poorly suited for emergency, overlapping with other funds, a need for reinforcing stakeholders coordination, and for strengthening implementation (e.g. through clearer selection criteria based on risk and vulnerability, updated territorial risk assessments and planning tools, and improved monitoring systems).

The Build Back Better (BBB) approach represents a paradigm shift from restoring pre-disaster conditions to enhancing resilience and reducing future vulnerabilities, integrating both structural and non-structural measures. It was first introduced in 2006 by the United Nations Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery. The OECD approach in the post COVID–19 BBB guidelines (2020) suggests a focus on different aspects of sustainability, such as reducing GHG emissions, reducing biodiversity loss, or improving supply chain resilience and circularity. BBB as proposed by the G20 Disaster Risk Reduction Working Group (2023), focuses on disaster risk reduction, community recovery, including psycho–social support as well as the general conditions for successful implementation, such as

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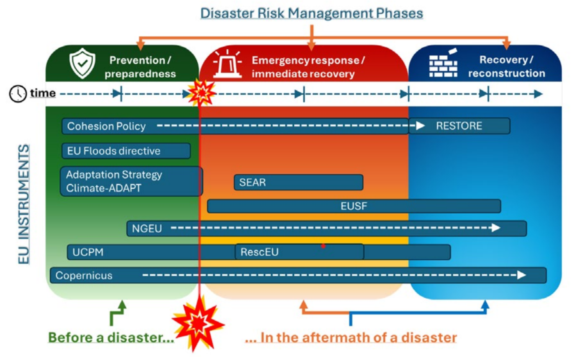
institutional and legal frameworks. The Asian Development Bank (2025) complements this by also referring to local leadership and capacity building.

In the context of Cohesion Policy, BBB means using disaster recovery and reconstruction not simply to restore what was lost, but to rebuild safer, more resilient, and future–proof communities, infrastructure, and economies. It transforms recovery into an opportunity to reduce existing vulnerabilities, adapt to future climate and hazard conditions, and strengthen institutional and social resilience. Therefore, BBB combines:

- risk–informed planning – rebuilding based on multi–hazard risk assessments and updated spatial data;
- resilient and green design – applying higher construction, environmental, and digital standards that anticipate future shocks;
- inclusive recovery – addressing the needs of vulnerable groups, restoring livelihoods, and essential services;
- learning and continuous improvement – capturing lessons from past events to update design, regulation, and governance.

EU instruments like the EUSF and RESTORE increasingly align with BBB principles, emphasising resilience, sustainability, and inclusiveness in post-disaster reconstruction. Embedding the BBB approach into Cohesion Policy requires legal, financial, and governance adjustments to promote preventive, risk-based solidarity and incentivise resilience–building over simple reconstruction.

Overview of current EU instruments according to different disaster management phases



Source : Authors' elaboration

The EU case studies carried out in this research highlighted that when countries have clear legal frameworks for disaster reconstruction, they can mobilise resources more rapidly while embedding resilience obligations. Strong pre-disaster planning and risk zoning are essential for BBB, as they facilitate resilient reconstruction. Outside the EU, the experience from Canada's Disaster Financial Assistance Arrangements (DFAA) shows that financial incentives drive the adoption of higher resilience standards.

Based on the carried-out analysis, recommendations can be made to strengthen Cohesion Policy in relation to Disaster Risk Management (DRM). For example, at the EU level, it is recommended to further clarify the complementary role of Cohesion Policy, acknowledge that recovery and reconstruction often extend beyond a single programming cycle, streamline procedures, promote innovation and knowledge exchange, and strengthen RESTORE and the integration of BBB.

Recommendations to national and regional policymakers include building local capacity, improving coordination and planning, prioritising preventive infrastructure, reducing bureaucracy, and strengthening monitoring. Many recommendations of this study align with the 2028–2034 MFF proposal, which promotes simplification, integration, flexibility, and a streamlined monitoring system. However, some features of the post–2027 MFF proposal risk weakening Cohesion Policy's role in reducing regional disparities, especially due to a more centralised approach that may limit regional and local engagement—key actors in addressing climate vulnerabilities. To mitigate this, regional participation in DRM should be ensured, funding for DRM and climate adaptation increased, and dialogue between public authorities and businesses improved.

Future Cohesion Policy regulations should explicitly include BBB principles in National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs), require risk–based reconstruction strategies, and integrate BBB criteria into project eligibility and selection to ensure long–term resilience over simple restoration

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