



Disaster Management & Disaster Preparedness Education in Austria, Croatia, Germany, and Poland **Analysis Report**



DRK Kreisverband
Berlin Schöneberg-Wilmersdorf e. V.



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Abbreviations

ABW	AkutBetreuungWien (Acute Care Vienna)
ASAR	Aeronautical Search and Rescue
ASB	Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund (Workers' Samaritan Federation Germany)
BBK	Bundesamt für Bevölkerungsschutz und Katastrophenhilfe (Federal Office for Civil Protection)
BMI	Bundesministerium für Inneres (Ministry of Internal Affairs)
Cat DDO	Catastrophe Deferred Drawdown Option
CBRN	Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear
CPR	cardiopulmonary resuscitation
DCNA	Disaster Competence Network Austria
DLRG	Deutsche Lebens-Rettungs-Gesellschaft (German Life Saving Association)
DRK	Deutsches Rotes Kreuz (German Red Cross)
DRR	disaster risk reduction
EMS	Emergencz Medical Service
ERDAI	Empowering Resilience through Digital Approaches and Inclusion
ESF	European Social Fund
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IMGW-PIB	Institute of Meteorologz and Water Management / National Research Institute
KGW	Koła Gospodyń Wiejskich (Rural Women's Association)
KPO	Krajowy Plan Odbudowy i Zwiększania Odporności (National Recovery Plan)
KPZK	Krajowy Plan Zarządzania Kryzysowego (National Crisis Management Plan)
KSÖ	Kompetenzzentrum Sicheres Österreich (Competence Centre for a Safe Austria)
KSRG	Krajowy System Ratowniczo-Gaśniczy (National Rescue and Fire Service)
L4R	Learning4Resilience
MA68	Magistratsabteilung 68 (Municipal Department 68)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OSP	Ochotnicza straż pożarna (Volunteer Fire Brigade)
PCK	Polski Czerwony Krzyż (Polish Red Cross)
PSP	Państwowa Straż Pożarna (State Fire Service)
RCB	Rządowe Centrum Bezpieczeństwa (Government Security Centre)
SAR	Search and Rescue
SEE ME	Safe and Equal in EMERGENCIES
SKKM	Staatliches Krisen- und Katastrophenschutzmanagement (Federal Crisis and Emergency Preventing Management)
THW	Technisches Hilfswerk (Federal Agency for Technical Relief)
UN	United Nations
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
ZSKG	Zivilschutz- und Katastrophenhilfegesetz (Law on civil and disaster protection)

Executive Summary

This report offers a comparative overview of the current state of disaster preparedness education in Austria, Croatia, Germany, and Poland, using a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, focus groups, and desk research. Data was collected between March and May 2026 through online surveys, semi-structured interviews, and workshops with stakeholders and target groups.

The report reveals a fragmented yet evolving landscape where legal reforms, public campaigns, and community-based initiatives coexist with significant gaps in accessibility, inclusivity, and coordination. While all four countries have multi-tiered disaster management systems (national, regional, local), decentralization often leads to coordination challenges. Volunteers play a critical role, but structural barriers—such as lack of training, language accessibility, and clear role definitions—limit their integration, particularly for migrants and spontaneous helpers.

Challenges persist in reaching vulnerable groups, such as older people, migrants, refugees, and people with disabilities. Key barriers include lack of awareness, inaccessible materials, logistical constraints (e.g., transportation, digital literacy), and psychological resistance to engaging with crisis-related topics. Passive formats (e.g., leaflets, posters) dominate, while interactive methods (e.g., drills, simulations) are less common, limiting effectiveness.

Best practices include participatory approaches (e.g., Austria's KOPHIS, Germany's RESILIENT VOICES), digital and multilingual resources (e.g., Poland's Safety Handbook, Germany's BBK guides), school-based programs (e.g., Austria's Safety Tour, Croatia's School in Nature), and volunteer engagement platforms (e.g., Austria's Team Österreich, Poland's 19115 system).

The report concludes with actionable recommendations to improve inclusivity, coordination, and practical relevance in disaster preparedness, emphasizing target-group-oriented training, adaptive formats, and cross-sectoral collaboration. The insights underscore the importance of tailored, adaptive approaches that empower all segments of society to respond effectively to emergencies.

1. Introduction

This analysis report examines disaster preparedness in the four partner countries of the **Learning4Resilience** project - Austria, Croatia, Germany, and Poland - focusing on organizational structures, key actors, and selected initiatives at national and local levels. It explores how organizations contribute to prevention, response, and public awareness, while showcasing established practices.

The report pursues several central objectives:

1. Assessing the current state of disaster preparedness education at the municipal level.
2. Identifying structural and conceptual gaps.
3. Evaluating whether existing offerings reach the project's target groups - seniors, women as caregivers, refugees and migrants, and people with intellectual disabilities or visual impairments - and the specific challenges they face.

By combining desk research with quantitative and qualitative data from stakeholder and target group surveys, as well as interviews, the report provides a systematic overview of existing structures and an in-depth analysis of barriers, potential, and areas requiring action. Additionally, it explores requirements for target group-oriented learning opportunities, deriving actionable recommendations to enhance accessibility, relevance, and effectiveness for these groups.

1.1 The Project Learning 4 Resilience

Learning4Resilience (L4R) is an EU funded project that aims to provide accessible and engaging information and learning opportunities on disaster preparedness at the community level. Its core objective is to enhance the population's resilience in the face of major incidents by equipping people with the knowledge and skills to respond effectively to crises and protect themselves and others. The project places special emphasis on vulnerable groups - seniors, women as caregivers, refugees and migrants, and people with intellectual disabilities or visual impairment - who face unique challenges in accessing traditional learning opportunities. By creating innovative and inclusive learning spaces in easily accessible locations and qualifying resilience trainers, the project seeks to build essential emergency response competencies while fostering social cohesion, participation, and civic engagement.

More information regarding the project on the project website:

<https://www.learning4resilience.eu/en/>

1.2 The Target Groups of the Project

1.2.1 Seniors

Seniors do not form a homogeneous group. They differ in terms of health, physical fitness, family and social circumstances, life experience, activity levels and needs. Age is merely one of the factors that determine a person's situation.

The World Health Organization divides old age into three stages:

- 60–75 years – advanced age, known as early old age,
- 75–90 years – old age, known as late old age,
- 90+ – very old age, known as longevity.

These stages of old age do not imply that people of the same age have the same needs, capabilities or limitations. When working with older people, getting to know the individual and their personal strengths is more important than their age. For the purposes of the Learning4Resilience project, we define the target group as people aged 60–75. This is a period of life in which many people remain active professionally or socially, take on new roles, engage with their local community and acquire new skills.

The ageing of the population is one of the most significant demographic processes currently taking place in Europe. According to Eurostat¹, on 1 January 2025, people aged 65 and over accounted for 22.0 per cent of the European Union's population. This means that more than one in five EU residents was aged 65 or over. Over the last decade, the proportion of this group has increased by 2.9 percentage points. At the same time, the median age of the EU population is rising. In 2025, it stood at 44.9 years, whereas in 2015 it was 42.8 years. This represents an increase of 2.1 years over the decade. This trend is set to intensify. According to the latest Eurostat projections, the proportion of people aged 80 and over is set to rise from 6 per cent in 2025 to 16 per cent in 2100.

An ageing population therefore means that it is becoming increasingly important to create conditions that enable older people to retain their independence, remain active, feel secure and participate in social life for as long as possible. In this context, strengthening the social resilience of older people is becoming particularly important.

Ageing is not a disease; it is a natural biological process. It affects the body's functioning and gradually alters a person's physical, cognitive and social abilities over time. These include, amongst others, a decline in hearing, eyesight and physical fitness, as well as memory loss. The extent of these changes, however, varies greatly from person to person and depends not only on age, but also on lifestyle, state of health, environmental conditions, financial circumstances and social relationships. For older people, practicing and learning social resilience is important, as it eliminates factors that accelerate ageing, such as loneliness and chronic stress. By socializing, looking after themselves and maintaining relationships with others, they strengthen their mental and physical health.

Older people possess a wealth of life experience, which can serve as an important starting point in the learning process. They learn best when they can relate new information to their own experiences and familiar situations. A positive, welcoming atmosphere and a sense of safety are crucial for them, as

¹ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/interactive-publications/demography-2025#population-structure>

these help them to open up and share their experiences. Seniors have a need for recognition, a sense of agency and, above all, a sense of physical and psychological safety.

Older people are able to get involved in voluntary work, partnerships, collaboration with young people and intergenerational initiatives. Their life experience, sense of responsibility, willingness to help and ability to build relationships make them valuable members of local communities. Entrusting them with roles of responsibility strengthens their sense of agency, promotes integration and allows them to realize their potential.

Older people are a very appreciative group of trainees. When they feel noticed, respected and treated with kindness, they repay this with great commitment, openness and positive energy. They enjoy the opportunity to meet others, have conversations and gain new experiences.

1.2.2 Refugees & Migrants

This target group of the project consists of adult individuals with migration experience (migrants). A distinction based on refugee or protection status is not considered meaningful within the project context, as asylum and residence procedures are dynamic and often result in long-term residence rights or naturalization. Individuals with migration experience are therefore not permanently classified as asylum seekers or refugees in statistical terms but become part of the general resident population. Against this background, the definition of the target group deliberately focuses on migration experience rather than on formal status categories.

The target group is highly heterogeneous. It comprises individuals with very different educational backgrounds, age structures, and social conditions. Language skills also vary considerably. While children and adolescents integrated into the German school system generally possess basic German language skills, it cannot be consistently assumed that adult individuals—even those participating in integration courses—have sufficient language proficiency. This results in the need for a target group-specific, multilingual approach to prevention.

With regard to disaster prevention and self-protection, it can also be assumed that there is a wide range of prior experiences within the target group. These range from experiences with crises, natural hazards, or conflicts in the countries of origin to experiences of flight and migration, but they differ significantly in type, scope, and relevance. Accordingly, existing knowledge and risk perceptions within the target group are not homogeneous.

Overall, it can be concluded that the target group of migrants encompasses a wide variety of subgroups whose needs, access conditions, and learning prerequisites differ substantially. For the project context, this implies that disaster management and self-protection content must be conveyed in a flexible, low threshold, and differentiated manner in order to adequately address the diversity of the target group.

1.2.3 Women as Caregivers

Women are a highly diverse group with different life situations, needs and resources. For us, it is therefore useful to focus on women who regularly take on care responsibilities for children, relatives or other people in need of support. This focus allows the project to address a specific life situation with

particular challenges, while recognizing the diversity of women within the group. Their individual circumstances and needs may vary, but they share the experience of caring for others while often having to put their own needs aside.

Care work is often unpaid, carried out alongside employment or other responsibilities, and largely invisible. Women may take on practical tasks such as childcare, personal care, household management or organizing appointments and medication, as well as much of the emotional and organizational responsibility. As a result, their own needs, rest and preparedness can easily be placed second. These challenges can become particularly significant in crisis and disaster situations. When childcare, care services, family support or other everyday structures are disrupted, the demands on caregivers can increase significantly. At the same time, women need to consider not only their own safety, but also the needs of those they care for, including medication, mobility, special care requirements or familiar routines. A key barrier to resilience-building is therefore limited time and capacity. Women with care responsibilities may have little opportunity to engage with crisis preparedness in addition to their existing commitments. Measures that require substantial time or additional organization may therefore be difficult to access.

For L4R, this means that resilience-building needs to be accessible, practical and realistic within the everyday lives of women with care responsibilities. By building on their existing knowledge, skills and experience, the project can support them in strengthening both their own resilience and their ability to care for others in times of crisis.

1.2.4 People with Intellectual Disabilities or Visual Impairment

1.2.4.1 People with Intellectual Disabilities

Intellectual disabilities are not an illness. They begin during the developmental period, before adulthood, and may be linked to genetic factors, pregnancy or birth, illness, injury, or other circumstances. Sometimes the cause is unknown. They affect how and how quickly a person learns, understands information, solves problems, and manages everyday life. Intellectual disabilities are a lifelong characteristic, but a person's abilities, knowledge, and independence can develop throughout life. People with intellectual disabilities are very different from one another. The level of intellectual disability provides only general information. Support should be based on the needs of the individual person in a specific situation. They should be addressed as adults: with respect, without baby talk or treating them like children, without speaking about them as if they were not present, and without automatically speaking to the person accompanying them instead. Simple language should be easy to understand, but never childish or demeaning.

People with mild intellectual disabilities usually communicate through speech, read and write simple texts, and carry out many everyday activities with relative independence. They may have greater difficulty with abstract content, complex texts, planning, assessing risks, and applying what they have learned in a new situation. People with moderate intellectual disabilities usually need more frequent support. They may communicate through speech, individual words, gestures, pictures, or other methods. They understand concrete information most easily and learn through demonstrations, small steps, and repeated practice. Do not make assumptions about what a person can or cannot do.

Learning is more successful when the content is connected to real life, divided into smaller parts, explained in short sentences, shown through an example or picture, practised, and repeated in

different situations. What a person learns is not always transferred automatically to a new setting. Speak clearly and at a natural pace. Communicate one important piece of information at a time, use familiar words, avoid irony and vague expressions, and allow enough time for a response. Check understanding by asking the person to show or explain in their own words what they need to do, rather than only asking, “Did you understand?” The aim is not to complete the task for the person, but to enable them to do as much as possible independently. Provide the lowest level of support needed: first allow time for an independent attempt, then give a short instruction or reminder, show an example, complete the first step together, and provide direct assistance only when needed. The person has the right to express an opinion, make choices, accept or refuse to participate, and ask for help. Safety is important, but excessive protection limits learning and independence. Adults with intellectual disabilities have the same needs for acceptance, belonging, success, respect, and choice as other people. Behavior that appears inappropriate may mean that the person did not understand, feels afraid or uncomfortable, finds the task too difficult, needs a break, does not know how to ask for help, does not want to participate, or is overwhelmed by stimuli. Before deciding that the person is disobedient or uninterested, try to understand what they are communicating through their behavior.

1.2.4.2 People with Visual Impairment

Visual impairment covers a broad spectrum, ranging from low vision to total blindness. It may be present from birth or acquired later in life through illness, injury or age-related conditions such as macular degeneration, cataracts or diabetic retinopathy. Because the degree, onset and cause of vision loss vary so widely, people with visual impairment are not a homogeneous group: their remaining vision, orientation and mobility skills, and use of assistive tools such as canes, guide dogs or screen readers differ considerably from person to person, and support should always be based on individual needs rather than assumptions.

According to the European Blind Union, an estimated 30 million people in Europe are blind or partially sighted, with the World Health Organization putting the figure at around 26 million. Sight loss is strongly linked to older age, with roughly nine in ten visually impaired people being over 65, meaning the target group increasingly overlaps with the project's senior target group. For disaster preparedness, this heterogeneity and the strong reliance on non-visual information matter directly: risk communication, warning systems and training materials are frequently designed around visual cues and signage, which can exclude people with visual impairment unless information is also provided in accessible, non-visual formats.

1.3 Methodological Approach

The present analysis report is based on a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative and qualitative research methods. The aim of this approach is to obtain both structured assessments of disaster preparedness education and in-depth insights into existing challenges and needs for the different target groups of the project. The methodology ensures a comprehensive, inclusive, and practice-oriented analysis of disaster preparedness education, highlighting country-specific challenges while identifying cross-cutting recommendations for the L4R project.

Data collection took place between March and May 2026. The quantitative analysis is based on two standardized surveys – one for stakeholders and one for the target groups. The surveys were mainly

provided as online surveys and distributed through various channels, including organizations intranets, social media channels (e.g. Instagram), email dissemination to partners, previous collaborators, contacts of relevant stakeholders collected during events, professional networks such as LinkedIn, and targeted forwarding to relevant actors in the field. Before starting the questionnaire, participants were provided with a short introductory text explaining the purpose of the survey and the broader project context. Participation was anonymous in order to enable the most open and unbiased responses possible.

The stakeholder survey explicitly addressed stakeholders on the one hand from the fields of disaster response and disaster prevention, and on the other hand on organizations working with or representing the target groups. In total 82 individuals took part in the stakeholder survey representing different types of organizations, including humanitarian aid organizations, public administration, academia, and civil society actors, and therefore contributing diverse perspectives on disaster preparedness education. The graphic below shows the composition of the respondents for each partner country.

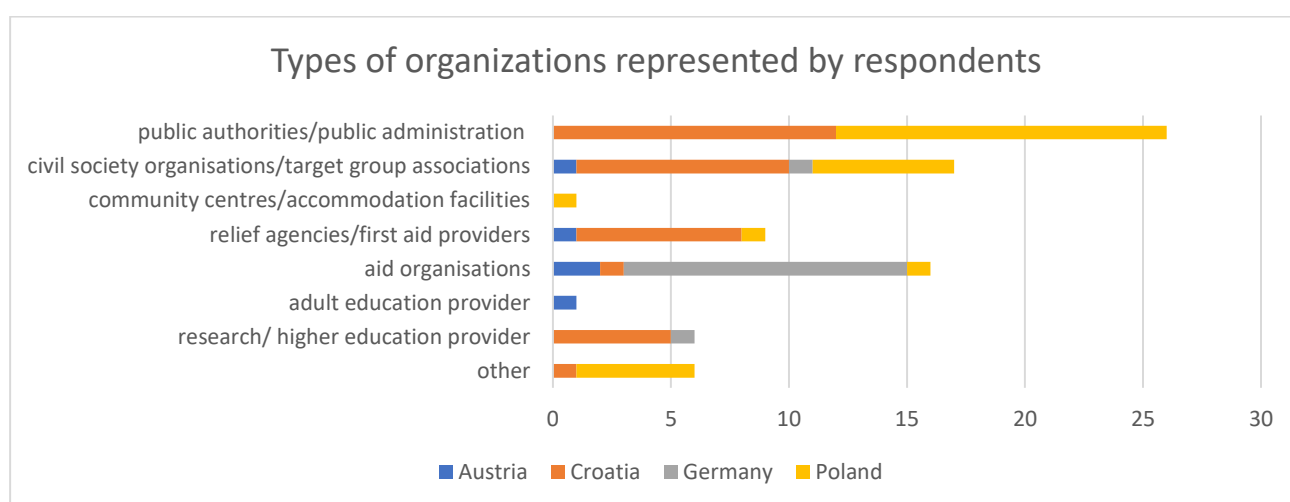


Figure 1: Types of organizations represented by respondents

The composition of the sample is of central importance for the interpretation of the results, as it significantly influences the professional and structural perspectives from which assessments are made. The majority of respondents are employed at public authorities or public administration, followed by respondents from civil society organizations or target group associations, and aid organizations. It is important to note that respondents from public authorities or public administration were from Poland and Croatia, similarly as respondents from civil society organizations or target group associations. Most respondents active in aid organizations were from Germany. The sample therefore primarily consists of individuals with direct involvement in public administration, the practical implementation of disaster protection and educational measures as well as with the target groups. It must be taken into account that the results rather reflect the perceptions and experiences of the respondents. These perceptions are shaped both by individual experience and by the specific structural conditions of the respective countries and municipalities.

The qualitative analysis is based on desk research accompanied by expert interviews, focus groups and workshops with stakeholders. The interviews were conducted as semi-structured conversations. Initially, standardized questions were addressed to ensure comparability of responses. This was followed by an open discussion segment, allowing respondents to provide more detailed assessments,

experiences, and practice-oriented perspectives. In Germany 16 semi-structured expert interviews took place. Interviewees came from two key fields: disaster response and disaster preparedness education on the one hand, and educational and integration work with migrants on the other hand. In Croatia a focus group with four participants was conducted. Two participants were from the civil protection sector, one from emergency services and one from the field of earthquake engineering and the civil protection headquarters. An additional semi-structured interview was conducted with a professional who works with adult individuals with visual impairments. In Austria in addition to the survey responses, three qualitative interviews were conducted with a representative of *Die Helfer Wiens* and two experts specializing in resilience among women. Furthermore, a stakeholder meeting was organized during the first transnational project meeting in Berlin, providing partners with an opportunity to exchange ideas and gather valuable insights for the analysis.

The target group survey addressed the four target groups of the project. Since the focus in each country is on one of the target groups, this is also reflected in the survey. In Austria, the online survey was disseminated among women, in Croatia among visually impaired people, in Germany among migrants and in Poland among seniors. A special case were the surveys for people with intellectual disabilities. Due to their disabilities, people with intellectual disabilities were not able to complete the online questionnaire independently. Therefore, semi-structured interviews supported by pictograms were conducted. The objective of the target group survey was to generate insights into whether crisis prevention services are known to the target groups, to what extent these services are perceived as usable, and which requirements exist regarding the design of such services if they have so far not been used or only used to a limited extent. The focus is not on the content-related evaluation of existing materials, but rather on the accessibility, comprehensibility, and practical usability of prevention services from the perspective of the target groups.

In the target group survey 204 individuals took part – 167 through the online survey, 28 in interviews and 9 in workshops. In Austria, a workshop with the target group was conducted with 5 participants to engage directly with participants, discuss the survey questions and responses in a group setting, and gain deeper qualitative insights. In Germany, one interview with a member of the emergency response unit who has been learning German for approximately 2.5 years and a workshop with staff members from volunteer coordination who themselves have a migration background took place. In Croatia, the study was conducted on a sample of 27 persons with intellectual disabilities. The sample included 13 persons with mild intellectual disabilities and 14 persons with moderate intellectual disabilities. Interviews were adapted to participants with intellectual disabilities by using pictograms and simple questions. Participants were assessed based on their ability to recognize the disaster, identify safe behavioral responses and demonstrate risk avoidance, including answering question: “What is happening? What should I do? What shouldn’t I do? How can I get help?” The analysis used a scoring method from 0 to 2 (incorrect – partially correct – correct). Maximum score per domain was 12 points. Domains covered were fire, flood, earthquake and a pandemic.

The sample is exploratory in nature and does not claim to be representative. Due to the limited sample size and the specific composition of participants, no representative conclusions can be drawn. Nevertheless, the data provide valuable insights into structural developments, challenges, key problem areas, patterns, and potentials in disaster preparedness education from the perspective of relevant professional actors as well as representatives of the target groups.

2. Disaster Management & Disaster Preparedness Education in the Partner Countries

This chapter provides an overview of the existing policies, programs, and best practices related to disaster preparedness and disaster preparedness education in each of the partner countries. It synthesizes findings from desk research alongside insights gathered through interviews, workshops, and online surveys. The analysis highlights the current landscape of training materials and initiatives, offering a comprehensive understanding of how each country addresses disaster preparedness within its specific context.

2.1 Austria

2.1.1 Organizational Structure & Key Actors

Austria's Emergency Management is federally organized, responsibilities are clearly structured within Federal Government, Federal States and municipalities. The main responsibility rests with the Federal States, whose legal regulations define organization and actions in case of emergency. The Federal Government mainly undertakes a coordination role, especially via the Federal Crisis and Emergency Management. A central principle is the subsidiarity where measures are implemented on the lowest level but can be expanded, if needed. Operative Action is being carried out by a network of emergency response organizations e.g., fire brigade, medical services like the Austrian Red Cross and the police. A main characteristic of Austria's Emergency Management is a high volume of volunteers, ensuring nationwide supply. The Austrian Army is deployed only if additional support becomes necessary.

On the federal level, coordination is provided especially by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (BMI), as part of the Federal Crisis and Emergency Preventing Management (SKKM) which consolidates relevant players in a case of emergency. Complementary, warning and information systems ensure the transfer of relevant mission information. The emergency management follows a holistic approach which comprises of four phases: prevention, precaution, handling and recovery.

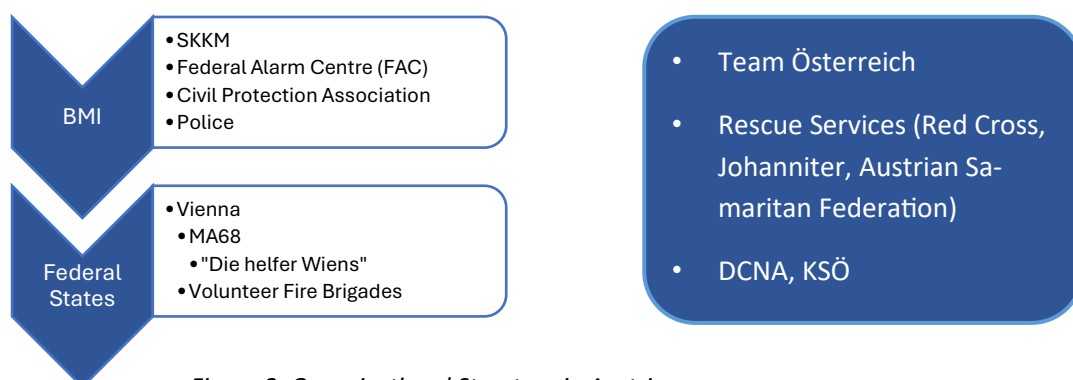


Figure 2: Organizational Structure in Austria

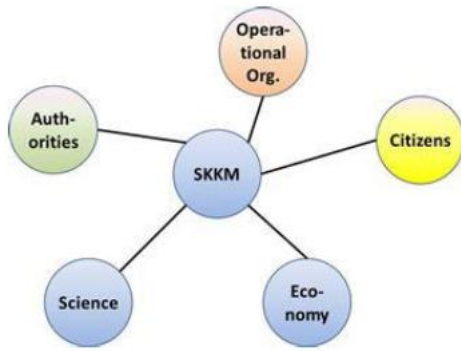


Figure 3: Federal Crisis and Emergency Management (SKKM) in Austria

The **Federal Crisis and Emergency Preventing Management (SKKM)** in Austria forms a central platform to coordinate the players during crisis and emergency and is embedded in the Ministry of Internal Affairs. It accommodates the coordination between the federal government, the federal states and emergency and relief organizations but does not take over operational control. It merely acts as a coordinating and supporting authority. In an actual crisis, the cooperation is carried out via the coordination board in which the representatives of different levels are embedded to ensure a mutual overview of the situation and coordinated measures support is provided by the Federal Warning Center in its role as the central authority for information and

alerting. The SKKM therefore acts on a strategic level by bundling information, enabling adjustments and supporting the cooperation during large-scale or complex incidents. Furthermore, it contributes to strengthening crisis and emergency precautions by risk analysis as well as education and advanced training programs.²

The **Austrian Civil Protection Association** plays an important supporting role. While operational measures in the event of a disaster are mainly carried out by public authorities and emergency organizations, the main focus of the association lies in prevention as well as informing and raising awareness among the population. The goal is to strengthen individual preparedness. The association focuses in particular on awareness building and public education. It provides information materials such as brochures, checklists, and guides, and runs campaigns on topics such as blackout preparedness, behavior during natural disasters, and general emergency planning. In addition, it organizes information events and works closely with municipalities as well as public authorities in order to reach as many people as possible. Overall, the association makes an important contribution to increasing societal resilience by sharing knowledge and strengthening the personal responsibility of citizens in times of crisis. Its work therefore complements the public structures of disaster management, especially in the area of preparation and prevention.³

An important actor in civil protection in Vienna is **Municipal Department 68 (MA68)**, the Vienna Fire Department, which is part of the municipal administration of the City of Vienna. MA68 is responsible for fire protection, disaster response, and crisis management within the city. It plays a key role in coordinating emergency operations and maintaining public safety during major incidents. A central component of MA68 is the professional fire brigade, which responds to fires, technical emergencies, and large-scale incidents. In addition, it contributes to preventive measures and safety planning. Another unit is Acute Care Vienna (ABW), which provides psychosocial support to individuals affected by traumatic events, such as accidents or disasters. This includes support for victims, relatives, and witnesses in the immediate aftermath of an incident. Furthermore, MA68 is involved in crisis management in Vienna, including the coordination of emergency services, cooperation with police and

² Federal Ministry of the Interior (Austria) (n.d.): *State Crisis and Disaster Management (SKKM)*. Available at: <https://www.bmi.gv.at/204/skkm/> (Accessed: 16 April 2026).

³ Austrian Civil Protection Association (n.d.): *The Association*. Available at: <https://zivilschutz.at/der-verband/> (Accessed: 16 April 2026).

medical services, and the management of communication during major emergencies or disasters. Overall, MA68 represents a central element of Vienna's disaster management system by combining emergency response, psychosocial support, and crisis coordination.

Die Helfer Wiens (Helpers of Vienna) are organizationally assigned to Municipal Department 68 (MA68 – Fire and Disaster Protection) and fulfil a public mandate to strengthen disaster preparedness in the city of Vienna. Their main focus is raising awareness among the public of potential risks, as well as promoting self-protection, personal preparedness, and societal resilience. Their work focuses on three central areas of responsibility. Firstly, this includes traditional prevention work, in particular in the form of fire safety education and disaster preparedness training. The objective is to impart fundamental knowledge about potential hazards and appropriate behavior in crisis situations. Secondly, Die Helfer Wiens organize and support numerous information and outreach events. These include large-scale events such as the Sicherheitsfest, as well as safety and fire brigade festivals and regional safety days in the districts. These formats enable direct engagement with broad segments of the population and contribute to raising awareness of safety-related issues. Thirdly, Die Helfer Wiens are involved in promoting volunteerism and civic engagement, for example through networking initiatives such as the K-Kreis⁴, as well as through supporting and increasing the visibility of campaigns in the field of disaster protection.

A particular focus is set on educational activities for children. Die Helfer Wiens conduct lectures and workshops on topics such as fire safety, radiation protection, and blackout preparedness, primarily aimed at pupils between the ages of six and ten. These programs are predominantly implemented in schools, especially within the framework of safety education days, and reach around 6,000 children annually. This offer is complemented by interactive formats such as the Safety Tour, as well as by holiday programs, in which children can visit the facilities of Die Helfer Wiens and experience safety in a practical, hands-on manner. In addition to broad public outreach, specific target groups are also addressed. Within the framework of the Vienna Academy, training sessions are conducted for hospital staff to prepare them for crisis and disaster situations. Furthermore, there is cooperation with the Federal Ministry of the Interior, within which police personnel, among others, are trained in the field of fire safety.

Overall, Die Helfer Wiens make a significant contribution to preventive safety efforts by linking information dissemination, practical exercises, and public awareness. Their approach combines early education with broad-based public outreach and thus sustainably strengthens the crisis preparedness of the Viennese population.⁵

Another key actor in disaster management in Austria is the **Disaster Relief Service of the Austrian Red Cross**. It is responsible for providing rapid assistance during major incidents, disasters, and emergency situations. Its primary objective is to support affected populations and ensure the timely provision of essential aid. Its operational activities include the provision of medical assistance, support during evacuations, and the establishment of emergency shelters for individuals affected by disasters. In addition, the service contributes to logistics, food distribution, and the supply of basic necessities during large-scale incidents. The Disaster Relief Service operates in close cooperation with other

⁴ <https://diehelferwiens.wien.gv.at/k-kreis>

⁵ Dominik Zeidler, Head of Division, "Die Helfer Wiens", interview, 24 March 2026

emergency response organizations, such as fire brigades, police, and medical services, in order to ensure coordinated response efforts.

A significant proportion of its personnel consists of trained volunteers who are specifically prepared for deployment in disaster situations and can be mobilized at short notice. Within the Disaster Relief Service of the Austrian Red Cross, both staff members and volunteers receive specialized training across multiple operational areas to ensure effective emergency and disaster response. Key competencies include Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), which focuses on maintaining or restoring safe water supply and sanitation in crisis situations, and Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN), which prepares teams to operate in hazardous environments and manage contamination risks. In addition, psychosocial support is provided to assist affected individuals in coping with the immediate psychological impact of traumatic events. Operational effectiveness is further supported by dedicated units for communications, ensuring reliable coordination during deployments, as well as for logistics and technical support, which manage the provision and distribution of equipment and relief supplies. Catering services complement these capacities by supplying food and beverages to responders and affected populations. Together, these functional areas enable a coordinated and comprehensive response to emergencies and disasters.

Overall, the Disaster Relief Service constitutes an integral component of Austria's disaster response system, particularly in supporting affected populations and contributing to coordinated emergency operations.

The **Disaster Competence Network Austria** (DCNA) is a national network dedicated to promoting research, knowledge exchange, and cooperation in the field of disaster management in Austria. It brings together stakeholders from academia, real-life applications and public institutions with the aim of strengthening interdisciplinary dialogue and promoting evidence-based approaches to disaster risk management. The DCNA's core responsibilities include conducting and connecting research programs, organizing specialist events, and facilitating the transfer of knowledge between research and real-life application. A particular focus is placed on developing innovative solutions and improving prevention, preparedness, and disaster response. In this way, the DCNA contributes to the ongoing development of disaster management in Austria, particularly at the scientific and strategic level.⁶

KSÖ – Kompetenzzentrum Sicheres Österreich (Competence Centre for a Safe Austria) is a central platform that promotes collaboration between government institutions, the private sector, and the public in the areas of safety and disaster preparedness in Austria. It operates as a network organization, supporting the exchange of information and developing shared strategies to strengthen national resilience. The KSÖ's core responsibilities include conducting studies and analyses, organizing specialist events, and fostering cooperation among a wide range of stakeholders. A particular focus is placed on raising awareness of risks and strengthening preventive measures. In this way, the KSÖ contributes to the ongoing development of safety and disaster management in Austria, particularly at the strategic level.⁷

⁶ <https://dcna.at/ueber-uns/>

⁷ Kompetenzzentrum Sicheres Österreich (n.d.): *About us – more about us*. Available at: <https://kompetenzzentrum-sicheres-oesterreich.at/ueber-uns/mehr-ueber-uns/> (Accessed: 16 April 2026).

2.1.2 Current State of Disaster Preparedness Education

The results from the L4R survey show that the current state of disaster preparedness education in Austria is perceived as **underdeveloped** by a majority of respondents. In the online survey, 40% of participants assessed the situation as *rather underdeveloped*, while 20% each considered it *very underdeveloped*, *neutral*, or *unsure*. Only one respondent (20%) viewed it as *very well developed*, with no one selecting *rather developed*.

Local government and administration are the **most involved actors**, identified by 60% of respondents. Aid organizations were mentioned by 40%, while other actors were referenced by 20%. Notably, **NGOs, community organizations, schools, universities, adult education providers, and private sector actors** were not identified as strongly involved by any respondent. Coordination among these actors is perceived as **rather good** by 40% of respondents, while another 40% selected *neutral* or indicated uncertainty. Only 20% described coordination as *rather poor*, with no one rating it as *poor* or *excellent*.

Respondents highlighted strengths in **planning, communication, and networking**. Structured plans and theoretical frameworks were noted as effective, alongside low-threshold public information events offered multiple times per year. Collaboration and regular exchange between stakeholders were also identified as positive elements. Additionally, knowing the right contacts in crisis situations and having established networks were emphasized as critical strengths.

Awareness of specific programs and initiatives remains limited. While some respondents were unaware of any concrete measures, others referenced individual efforts. *Die Helfer Wiens* was mentioned for its information events and online offerings, alongside civil protection initiatives, including public information events and activities for children, such as competitions. However, two respondents either left the question blank or stated that no programs were known to them.

Training programs in Austrian municipalities prioritize **technical disruptions or accidents** (e.g., chemical incidents, infrastructure failures) and **human-caused incidents** (e.g., terrorist attacks), each selected by 60% of respondents. **Natural disasters** (e.g., floods, earthquakes) were identified by 40%, while **health-related emergencies** (e.g., pandemics) and other categories were each mentioned by 20%.

The most common learning formats in disaster preparedness education include **webinars, on-site demonstrations, and information campaigns** (e.g., flyers, posters, brochures), each selected by 60% of respondents, and **workshops, online courses, and community-based exercises or drills**, each mentioned by 20%. Notably, peer-to-peer training and simulations were not selected by any respondent.

Across all four target groups, the **perceived accessibility of learning opportunities** varies among stakeholders, but overall tends to be rated as neutral or limited. For **older people**, responses are mixed: two participants (40%) selected neutral, while the remaining responses are evenly distributed between rather good (20%), rather poor (20%), and poor (20%). No respondents rated accessibility as excellent. For **women**, all five respondents (100%) selected neutral or indicated that they do not know, suggesting a lack of clear perception or experience regarding accessibility for this group. Accessibility for **refugees and migrants** is generally perceived more critically. Two respondents (40%) rated it as rather poor, one (20%) as poor, and two (40%) selected neutral. No positive ratings were given. A similar pattern emerges for **people with disabilities**, although slightly more varied. Two respondents

(40%) selected neutral, while one respondent each (20%) rated accessibility as poor, rather poor, and excellent.

2.1.3 Key Initiatives & Good Practice Examples

Safety Tour

The Safety Tour of Die Helfer Wiens is part of the Austrian Children Safety Olympics and addresses 3rd and 4th grade pupils. Target of this event is to increase the awareness of safety and self-protection in a playful and practical way, especially in preventing accidents and the correct behavior in emergencies. This is carried out in team challenges whereby the children prove their knowledge, skills and team orientation.⁸

Sicherheitsfest – Vienna Safety Festival

The Vienna Safety Festival, also known as the Wiener Sicherheitsfest, is an event in Vienna that focuses on safety, emergency services, and disaster prevention. It is organized by Die Helfer Wiens (K-Kreis). The festival brings together organizations such as the fire department, police, ambulance, and rescue services, giving visitors the opportunity to learn more about their work. Through information booths, live demonstrations, and interactive activities, visitors can gain a better understanding of how emergency services operate and how to respond in dangerous situations. The festival also aims to raise public awareness about safety and prevention, with activities that are especially accessible to families and children. Overall, the Vienna Safety Festival provides an informative and interactive way to learn about safety, emergency preparedness, and the important role of emergency and relief organizations in Vienna.⁹

Protect

“What happened and what should I do now?” – this was the key question addressed by the volunteer project PROTECT – Wir für Wien. Run by the Vienna Red Cross, the project supported people with migration or refugee backgrounds in understanding how to act in emergency situations. Many faced not only language barriers but also an unfamiliar emergency system. PROTECT trained volunteers as “Emergency Help Trainers”, who then shared important knowledge through free workshops. These workshops, usually about two hours long, taught participants how to respond to situations such as fires, violence, and medical emergencies. They also covered how to call for help, basic first aid, and where to find support in Vienna. A main goal of the project was to promote integration and improve access to the emergency system. Volunteers played an important role by sharing knowledge within their communities. Overall, the workshops aimed to increase awareness, strengthen safety knowledge, and help participants feel more confident in emergency situations. The project was eventually discontinued due to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰

Team Österreich (Team Austria)

⁸ Dominik Zeidler, interview, 24 March 2026

⁹ City of Vienna – Helpers of Vienna (n.d.): Vienna Safety Festival. Available at: <https://diehelferwiens.wien.gv.at/wiener-sicherheitsfest> (Accessed: 16 April 2026).

¹⁰ Austrian Red Cross (n.d.): *Project idea – PROTECT: We for Vienna*. Available at: <https://blogneu.rotekreuz.at/protect/projektidee/> (Accessed: 16 April 2026)

An important initiative within Austria's volunteer-based disaster and support system is Team Österreich, a joint project of the Austrian Red Cross and Hitradio Ö3. Team Österreich functions as a nationwide platform that connects registered volunteers with opportunities to provide assistance in emergency situations, disasters, and social support activities. Individuals can register online and are mobilized when support is required in their respective regions. One area of activity includes support in food distribution, particularly through initiatives of the Austrian Red Cross such as "Team Österreich Tafel", where volunteers assist in providing food to people in need.

In addition, digital tools are integrated into the initiative. Through the platform "Team Österreich Digital" and its associated mobile application, volunteers receive alerts, access relevant information, and coordinate their involvement during crisis situations. A further component is the "Team Österreich Lebensretter" system, which alerts trained volunteers in the vicinity of a cardiac arrest via a mobile application. This enables the initiation of cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) prior to the arrival of emergency medical services. Moreover, the initiative promotes neighborhood-based support by encouraging individuals to assist others within their local communities, particularly vulnerable groups such as elderly or socially isolated persons.

Overall, Team Österreich represents a mechanism for strengthening volunteer engagement and supporting coordinated assistance in emergency and everyday contexts.¹¹

KOPHIS

The KOPHIS project addresses how to improve the safety of care dependent and vulnerable people living at home during crises and disasters. A key feature of the project is its participatory approach, actively involving the target group with the research process. This ensures that their experiences, needs and perspectives are directly incorporated into the development of measures, increasing both their acceptance and effectiveness.

One major success factor is the close collaboration between different stakeholders, including civil protection, healthcare services and civil society. This cooperation helps to build local support networks that can respond more effectively in emergency situations. A central best practice is the use of multi stage dialogue forums. First, needs are identified through realistic crisis scenarios. Next, solutions are developed and discussed collaboratively, and finally, the results are presented. This iterative process ensures that measures are continuously adapted to the actual needs of the target group. The project resulted in developing practical information and awareness raising materials. Key aspects include strengthening social networks, providing clear points of contact, promoting individual preparedness and ensuring access to reliable information during crises.

At the same time, the project highlights challenges such as the difficulty of reaching the target group and its heterogeneity. This underlines another best practice: measures should be designed to be low threshold, practical and adaptable to everyday life. Overall, KOPHIS demonstrates that combining active participation, stakeholder collaboration and iterative development is essential for creating effective disaster preparedness strategies for care dependent and vulnerable populations.¹²

¹¹ Austrian Red Cross (n.d.): *Team Österreich*. Available at: <https://www.rotekreuz.at/ich-will-helfen/team-oesterreich> (Accessed: 16 April 2026).

¹² Händlmeyer, A., Oschmiansky, H. and Winter, R. (2019) 'KOPHIS in der Modellregion Willich: Ort partizipativer Forschungsmethoden und Wege zur aktiven Einbindung der Zielgruppe', in Krüger, M. and Max,

2.1.4 Challenges & Gaps

Austria's disaster management system is characterized by the cooperation of multiple key actors operating across different levels. While many of these organizations are state-based or institutionally anchored, the system relies heavily on smaller actors, particularly volunteers and local initiatives, who play a crucial role in practical response and support. This highlights the importance of collaboration between formal structures and community-based engagement, even though this analysis focuses on a selection of central actors within a broader and more complex system.

The responses suggest several areas where stakeholders see potential for further development and refinement. The primary challenges in disaster preparedness education identified by the survey respondents include:

- **Lack of funding and low public interest** (each identified by 60% of respondents).
- **Low public awareness** (40%).
- **Limited training capacities** and other unspecified challenges (each 20%).

A recurring theme is the need to translate existing plans into practical action. In addition, one respondent highlighted the lack of an overarching strategic direction, indicating a need for a more coordinated and structured approach. Another response pointed to limited political willingness to actively involve the population in disaster preparedness efforts. These barriers highlight structural and societal obstacles that hinder the effectiveness of disaster preparedness efforts.

2.2 Croatia

2.2.1 Organizational Structure & Key Actors

The civil protection system in the Republic of Croatia is organised through state authorities, local and regional self-government units, civil protection headquarters and designated operational forces. Its structure is based on functional coordination rather than a single continuous chain of command. State administrative bodies, local and regional self-government bodies and operational forces exercise their respective statutory competences and cooperate in preparedness, response and recovery.

This distinction is particularly important in Zagreb: the Ministry of the Interior's territorial civil-protection structures and the City of Zagreb's civil-protection structures are separate institutional lines that cooperate, but they do not form a simple hierarchical chain.

At state level, the **Ministry of the Interior** performs central-government responsibilities in the field of civil protection through the **Civil Protection Directorate**¹³. The Directorate performs administrative, professional and operational tasks related to preparedness, prevention, coordination, protection and rescue, emergency management, the 112 system and other matters assigned to it by law and subordinate legislation. **The Civil Protection Headquarters of the Republic of Croatia** is not merely an

M. (eds.) *Resilienz im Katastrophenfall: Konzepte zur Stärkung von Pflege- und Hilfsbedürftigen im Bevölkerungsschutz*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, pp. 133–154.

¹³ civilna-zastita.gov.hr

internal organisational unit subordinate to the Civil Protection Directorate. Under the Civil Protection System Act, a civil protection headquarters is a professional, operational and coordinating body for the implementation of civil-protection measures and activities in major accidents and disasters. The national Headquarters is established and appointed by the Government of the Republic of Croatia upon the proposal of the competent minister. The Ministry of the Interior provides the administrative and technical support necessary for the work of the national Headquarters. In a disaster, the leadership arrangements are governed by the Civil Protection System Act.

The Zagreb Regional Civil Protection Office forms part of the territorial organisation of the Civil Protection Directorate of the Ministry of the Interior. It represents the state civil-protection administration within its territorial area. It should therefore not be described as a regional self-government authority or as a body hierarchically superior to the City of Zagreb's civil-protection system. According to the current organisational structure, the Zagreb Regional Civil Protection Office includes, among other units, the Zagreb Civil Protection Service, the Zagreb County 112 Centre and inspection services.

The City of Zagreb has a special legal position because it simultaneously exercises the competences of a city and a county. Accordingly, its civil-protection responsibilities include tasks that elsewhere in Croatia may be divided between local and regional self-government levels. As a local and regional self-government unit, the City of Zagreb is responsible for organising, planning, developing, financing and ensuring the effective functioning of the civil protection system within its statutory remit. It adopts the relevant risk assessments, civil-protection plans, development and exercise documents, provides conditions for operational-force readiness and performs other duties prescribed by law.

The permanent professional and administrative tasks of the City of Zagreb in this field are performed by the City Office for Municipal Self-Government, Transport, Communal Services, Civil Protection and Safety¹⁴. Within its scope, the Office is responsible for the civil protection system, defence, fire protection and firefighting, coordination of operational civil-protection forces intended to implement civil-protection measures, and urban-safety matters. Within the Office, the competent organisational sector performs professional tasks connected with planning, development and effective functioning of the civil protection system, preparation and updating of risk assessments and civil-protection plans, mobilisation arrangements, databases of operational capacities and resources, public information and education, crisis communication, fire protection and firefighting, and related coordination and administrative tasks.

The City of Zagreb Civil Protection Headquarters is the professional, operational and coordinating body established for the City of Zagreb. It has a distinct role from that of the permanent City administration. Its functions include collecting and processing early-warning information, supporting civil-protection planning, managing the response of the civil protection system within its statutory competence, informing the public and coordinating measures and activities in major accidents and disasters.

The Headquarters should not be presented as directly commanding every individual emergency service. Firefighting units, police, emergency medical services, the Croatian Red Cross¹⁵, the Croatian Mountain

¹⁴ zagreb.hr/gradski-ured-za-mjesnu-samoupravu-promet-komunalne/175283

¹⁵ hck.hr

Rescue Service¹⁶ and other bodies act within their respective legal mandates and command structures, while coordination is performed through the mechanisms established by civil-protection legislation and sector-specific laws.

The Civil Protection System Act expressly identifies the following as operational forces of the civil protection system:

- civil protection headquarters;
- firefighting operational forces;
- operational forces of the Croatian Red Cross;
- operational forces of the Croatian Mountain Rescue Service;
- associations;
- civil protection units and civil protection commissioners;
- on-site coordinators; and
- legal entities designated within the civil protection system.

Firefighting forces, the Croatian Red Cross and the Croatian Mountain Rescue Service have a particularly important statutory role and should not be described merely as voluntary associations providing auxiliary support. They are recognised by law as **fundamental operational forces of the civil protection system in major accidents and disasters**. Police and emergency medical services are essential first-response and emergency-response services and regularly cooperate with civil-protection bodies and operational forces. However, for purposes of a formal legal description, they should not be presented as belonging to the same statutory category as the operational forces expressly listed in the Civil Protection System Act. The Armed Forces of the Republic of Croatia and the police may be engaged under the conditions prescribed by law when the available civil-protection capabilities and resources are insufficient or when their engagement is otherwise required under the applicable legal framework. Their activities remain governed by their respective sectoral legislation and command structures.

Functional relationship between the principal actors in Zagreb

Institution / body	Institutional level	Primary role
Ministry of the Interior - Civil Protection Directorate	State	Central state-administration responsibilities for the civil protection system.
Civil Protection Headquarters of the Republic of Croatia	State	National professional, operational and coordinating body for major accidents and disasters.
Zagreb Regional Civil Protection Office	State - territorial organisation	Territorial organisational unit of the Ministry of the Interior / Civil Protection Directorate.
City of Zagreb	Local and regional self-government	Organises, develops, finances and ensures the functioning of the civil protection system within its statutory competence.

¹⁶ hgss.hr

City Office for Municipal Self-Government, Transport, Communal Services, Civil Protection and Safety	City administration	Permanent professional, administrative, planning and coordination tasks in civil protection, fire protection, firefighting and safety.
City of Zagreb Civil Protection Headquarters	City - operational coordination	Professional, operational and coordinating body for civil-protection measures and response.
Operational forces	Operational level	Implement civil-protection measures and activities in accordance with law, plans and their own statutory mandates.

Table 1: Functional relationship between the principal actors in Zagreb

The institutional relationship is therefore primarily one of statutory competence, cooperation and coordination - not a single hierarchical line from the Ministry of the Interior through the Zagreb Regional Civil Protection Office to the City of Zagreb.

Legal and institutional basis:

- Civil Protection System Act, as amended - in particular provisions concerning local and regional self-government units, operational forces and civil protection headquarters.
- Statute of the City of Zagreb - provisions defining the City's local and regional self-government competences, including fire and civil protection.
- Official organisational information of the Ministry of the Interior / Civil Protection Directorate concerning the Zagreb Regional Civil Protection Office.
- Official organisational information of the City of Zagreb concerning the City Office for Municipal Self-Government, Transport, Communal Services, Civil Protection and Safety and its competent civil-protection sector.

This overview is intended as a concise institutional description for professional and international cooperation. In a specific emergency, powers, command arrangements and coordination mechanisms depend on the type and scale of the event, the applicable civil-protection plan, decisions of competent authorities and sector-specific legislation.

Policies and programs for disaster preparedness

In Croatia, fifteen single risks and one complex risk are formally recognized. The single risks include plant and animal diseases, extreme temperatures, epidemics and pandemics, industrial accidents, landslides, nuclear accidents, marine pollution, floods caused by overflowing inland waters, earthquakes, wildfires, radiological accidents, snow and ice events, drought and soil salinization. The complex risk combines earthquake and flood hazards specifically in the area of the City of Zagreb.

Crisis preparedness in Croatia has been influenced by recent events including the May 2014 floods in Vukovarsko - srijemska County, a large fire in July 2017 that spread to nearby towns and the city of Split, the COVID-19 epidemic, the March 2020 earthquake that struck Zagreb, and the December 2020 earthquake that devastated the areas of Sisačko – moslavačka, City Zagreb, and Karlovačka counties. Regarding these events, Civil Protection Directorate of the Ministry of Interior has become more active and visible since 2020, issuing recommendations and guidance. In 2022 it adopted the **Disaster Risk**

Management Strategy to 2030, a long-term national framework for disaster risk management that aims to reduce risks, improve preparedness and strengthen the country's ability to prevent, respond to and recover from disasters by prioritizing risk reduction, enhancing early warning and coordination systems, and building resilience at national, regional, and local levels. Complementarily, they adopted the **Action Plan for Disaster Risk Management** covering the period until 2024. No new Action plans regarding disaster risk management have been adopted since.

In 2023 the Government of the Republic of Croatia has adapted the **National Civil Protection Action Plan** and in 2024 The City of Zagreb has adopted the **Civil Protection Action Plan of the City of Zagreb**. The Plan identifies and prioritizes vulnerable population groups, including individuals with visual impairments as well as intellectual and mental disabilities. It outlines the characteristics of each group and addresses their specific needs and challenges in crisis and disaster situations. Civil Protection of Zagreb also keeps statistics on people with disabilities (type of disability, assistive devices, vulnerable groups by district). Based on that data, The Civil Protection Action Plan of the City of Zagreb has an evacuation plan with estimated numbers of people needing evacuation in worst-case scenarios and a mapping of housing units with easy access for persons with disabilities and those without appropriate access. The City of Zagreb in 2025 has adapted the **Civil Protection System Development Plan for 2026** but it doesn't mention any activities for people with disabilities.

In 2009 **The Croatian National Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction** was established in order to coordinate disaster risk management (DRR), promote proactive policies and enhance resilience against disasters. It serves as a forum for ministries, scientists, and stakeholders (including Red Cross and Mountain Rescue) to improve safety measures.

The World Bank Group's Board of Executive Directors in December 2025 approved a project aimed at strengthening Croatia's disaster preparedness and institutional, physical, financial and social resilience. The €100 million **Disaster Preparedness and Resilience Development Policy Loan** with a Catastrophe Deferred Drawdown Option (Cat DDO) will enable the government to better manage the fiscal impact of disasters by allowing it to quickly mobilize resources, facilitating emergency response and resilient recovery.

2.2.2 Current State of Disaster Preparedness Education

The results from the L4R survey show that the current state of disaster preparedness training in Croatia is perceived as **moderate**, with divided opinions among participants. When asked to rate the system, 37.1% assigned it a score of 3 (neutral). An equal number of respondents rated it positively (scores of 4 and 5, totaling 11 responses) and negatively (scores of 1 and 2, also totaling 11 responses). This suggests that while some aspects of disaster preparedness training are seen as effective, others are viewed as insufficient, depending on local context or perspective.

According to the survey, the **actors most involved in disaster preparedness education** are NGOs and community organizations (60%), followed by local government and administration (51.4%) and international humanitarian organizations (42.9%). Other stakeholders are mentioned less frequently, including research and higher education institutions (22.9%), adult education providers (5.7%) and the private sector (2.9%). A small share of participants selected "other" (8.6%) without specifying, while 11.6% indicated that they do not know.

When asked to rate the **coordination between these actors**, the largest share of participants (42.9%) again assigned a score of 3. In this case, more participants gave positive ratings (4 and 5, 14 responses in total) than negative ones (1 and 2, 6 responses in total). This suggests that coordination is seen

somewhat more positively, but the high number of middle scores still shows that there is room for improvement and no strong overall agreement. Additionally, they were asked to point out **what already works** well. Most responses highlight joint exercises, trainings and educational activities, particularly in first aid and evacuation. Fire services, the Red Cross Societies, hospitals, schools, kindergartens and various civil protection and community organizations are most frequently mentioned as well, along with support from external experts and information sharing through central organizations and professional events. At the same time, some participants were unable to provide an assessment due to limited experience or information, while others noted that cooperation is still not fully developed and is often mainly limited to formalities.

Existing programs and initiatives primarily include professional training and capacity building, such as firefighter education (basic and advanced levels), specialized rescue courses (e.g., from heights, depths, and collapsed structures) and first aid and mass-casualty response training. They also cover crisis preparedness activities, including regular exercises, simulations, evacuation drills and training for civil protection personnel (both command staff and general units). Additional efforts involve improving equipment, technical capacities, operational procedures and managing complex interventions. Some respondents mentioned EU funded projects and formal education programs in crisis and emergency management, while fewer highlighted initiatives aimed at the general public and vulnerable groups, such as awareness-raising, targeted education and educational materials. Psychological crisis intervention programs were mentioned only once. Overall, responses suggest that while a range of programs exists, their visibility and accessibility remain limited, with some perceiving that such initiatives are insufficient or not widely available.

According to the survey, the most **commonly prioritized incidents in training programs** are natural disasters (77.1%). These are followed by health emergencies (45.7%) and technological failures or accidents (34.3%). About 17.1% of participants identified human-induced incidents (e.g., terrorist attacks) as a priority, while others mentioned traffic accidents, traumatic events or indicated that there are no clear priorities or that they are not aware of them.

The results show that most **learning opportunities are practical and hands-on**. Community drills (51.4%) and workshops (45.7%) are the most common, followed by simulations (37.1%) and information campaigns (37.1%), indicating a focus on experience-based learning. In contrast, online courses (22.9%) and peer-to-peer trainings (11.4%) are less common. Some respondents (14.3%) said there are no opportunities or that they are not aware of them. These responses mostly came from NGOs and community organizations, which may point to gaps in access or communication between these groups and other relevant stakeholders. Participants also commented on how well these learning opportunities are **known among the general public**. Most rated awareness as very low, noting that people tend to show interest only when a crisis is already happening. Only a few stakeholders said that awareness is good or that they are always informed about learning opportunities.

Stakeholders also rated the **accessibility of the offered learning opportunities** for vulnerable target groups: older people, women, refugees/migrants and people with disabilities (specifically people with intellectual disabilities and visual impairment (including blind people)). Overall, accessibility is rated as low to moderate across all groups, suggesting that crisis preparedness learning opportunities are not seen as sufficiently inclusive. This is especially evident for refugees and migrants, who receive predominantly the lowest ratings, indicating that they are perceived as the least reached by current training and information efforts. Similar concerns are visible for people with intellectual disabilities and people with visual impairments, where responses also cluster toward low accessibility scores. For older people, perceptions are somewhat mixed but still lean toward limited accessibility. Women show a

more even distribution of responses suggesting no clear consensus, but still no strong indication of high accessibility.

Participants highlight that certain education and preparedness programs are implemented in primary schools and high schools, especially through school-in-nature programs, while special schools for children with disabilities are not sufficiently included. One of the key challenges identified is the lack of adequately adapted training materials and education tailored to their needs.

Participants also report that their personal experience of participating in trainings related to working with persons with disabilities in crisis situations is still limited and that **disability is generally not addressed as a separate topic in existing trainings**, nor are specific needs and adapted response procedures sufficiently included. Some have personally taken part in trainings and activities related to working with persons with disabilities in crisis situations, mentioning training for working with blind and visually impaired persons and people with multiple sclerosis. Stakeholders strongly emphasized on the need for all emergency and rescue services to acquire basic knowledge on how to approach people with different types of disabilities, including practical skills in rescue operations and the use of assistive technologies (such as for example wheelchairs). It is stressed that the issue in crisis situations is not disability itself, but rather a lack of knowledge on both sides (responders and persons with disabilities) and potential resistance or lack of cooperation that may arise in certain groups. Regarding the last point, persons on the autism spectrum and those with intellectual disabilities were particularly mentioned.

2.2.3 Key Initiatives & Good Practice Examples

There were several national and local projects regarding this topic. The EU Civil Protection Mechanism financed the projects **Safe and Equal in EMERGENCIES - SEE ME (2022-2023)** and **SEE ME 2 - Safe and Equal in EMERgencies 2 (2024-2025)** with the project Coordinator being the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Croatia, Civil Protection Directorate. Regarding our target group, it resulted in the publication of brochures for dealing with earthquakes, floods and forest fires for people with disabilities. A brochure with instructions for emergency services on how to approach people with disabilities was also published as well as guidelines for treating persons with disabilities in emergencies. Although the project provided valuable insights into the needs related to the protection and rescue of persons with disabilities in emergencies, as well as guidance for planning and responding to those needs, its primary focus was on professionals working with them rather than on dedicated training programs in which persons with disabilities actively participate and learn.

In 2017, the **Croatian Union of Persons with Disabilities** published a guide on supporting persons with disabilities in emergencies, crises, and disasters. The guide was developed as part of a project funded by the City of Zagreb. In 2022, a Manual for Working with Persons with Disabilities in Crisis Situations was produced by the same organization as part of the project Challenges in Crisis as part of the ESF Operational Programme Efficient Human Resources 2014-2020. The project aimed to strengthen the capacity of civil society organizations to respond effectively to the needs of local communities during crises. Although training was provided for professionals working in civil protection, emergency response, and non-governmental organizations, no dedicated training was organized specifically for people with disabilities. While a guide for persons with disabilities in crisis situations exists, it was not accompanied by targeted training programs. Although additional materials addressing people with disabilities in crisis situations exist, the desk research did not identify any systematically designed or

continuously implemented training programs specifically tailored to individuals with disabilities, particularly those with intellectual disabilities and visual impairments, including blindness.

The previously mentioned **Croatian National Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction** provides a dedicated section featuring educational materials, including brochures and videos, addressing various types of crisis situations. These resources are tailored to both adults and children. In addition, the National Civil Protection Headquarters offers educational guidelines on its website specifically designed for people with different types of disabilities, as well as for those who work with or support them.

The City of Zagreb actively implements civil protection education for children and youth through school-based programs and the “**School in Nature**” initiative. As part of the “School in Nature” program, held at the Zagreb Red Cross facility on Mount Medvednica, several institutions contribute to the delivery of specialized lectures. The Croatian Mountain Rescue Service provides training on rescue operations, the Zagreb Red Cross delivers sessions on water safety, while the City Office and the Fire Brigade focus on general safety topics. In addition, the Zagreb Red Cross is launching a series of mini-workshops on preparedness and crisis management. To date, more than 20 secondary schools have applied, with over 100 students and teachers expected to participate in the training. In parallel, the Civil Protection Directorate conducts educational activities in kindergartens and high schools, often in cooperation with the City Office for Local Self-Government, Transport, Civil Protection and Security. This City Office also organizes educational activities for primary school students, with the aim of raising awareness about the importance of the civil protection system and familiarizing young people with appropriate behavior in the event of natural and technological disasters. Particular emphasis is placed on strengthening children’s preparedness and their ability to respond effectively in crisis situations.

The Zagreb Red Cross also conducts a range of training and awareness-raising activities. Youth volunteers organize workshops in kindergartens and schools under the program “**Safer Schools and Kindergartens,**” which includes the participation of children with disabilities. Through adapted activities, participants learn about crisis preparedness and appropriate responses to emergencies such as earthquakes, fires, and other disasters. The program also helps children recognize emergency services and understand where to seek help in situations of danger. Furthermore, a new cycle of training for youth units focused on crisis response is being introduced. For the first time, it will include a module on communication with people with intellectual disabilities. The Zagreb Red Cross has also been implementing a first aid education program in primary and secondary schools for 28 years, and in the past five years, this program has been expanded to include students with disabilities.

Regarding other stakeholders, the Croatian Union of Persons with Disabilities sometimes organizes one-day online lectures on crisis management and responses to emergency situations. No additional training programs have been identified. Although some programs include the participation of children with disabilities, it remains unclear to what extent the materials and teaching approaches are adequately adapted to their specific needs. Furthermore, significant gaps persist in relation to adults with disabilities who are no longer part of the formal education system. While certain local organizations occasionally organize lectures or workshops, these initiatives generally lack a structured, systematic and long-term approach.

2.2.4 Challenges & Gaps

Civil Protection Headquarters are **decentralized** across the city’s 17 districts, which allows for localized response but also creates coordination challenges. To address this, the Civil Protection Office plans to

appoint local commissioners at the district level. These commissioners would be responsible for collecting and managing data on vulnerable individuals within their communities. Ideally, they would be residents of the districts they serve, ensuring local knowledge and trust. However, a significant obstacle is the shortage of personnel, as approximately 4,000 commissioner positions within the Civil Protection Headquarters remain unfilled. In parallel, efforts are underway to update the city's map of reception areas, including locations for temporary shelters such as tent settlements, schools with sports halls, and helipads. This update is expected to be completed by the end of the year and will play a crucial role in improving emergency preparedness and response capacity.

One key issue is the limited accessibility and sharing of data related to persons with disabilities. Croatia maintains a **national Register of Persons with Disabilities**, which is an official database containing information on individuals with disabilities. While a national-level register exists, legal restrictions, particularly those related to data protection regulations (GDPR), prevent access to this information at the City level. This creates difficulties for local authorities and emergency services in identifying and supporting individuals who may require additional assistance during crises. Although this issue cannot be directly addressed through training courses, it is important to highlight that if emergency services lack information about where persons with disabilities live and the nature of their disabilities, their response may be delayed, less effective or insufficiently prioritized. At the same time, it is in the best interest of persons with disabilities that civil protection and emergency services are aware of their location and specific needs, as even with thorough personal preparedness, there are situations in which external assistance is essential. Additionally, organizations and associations working with persons with disabilities are often unable or unwilling to share relevant data, further limiting coordination and preparedness. Participants described the idea of development of a database that would allow emergency services to access information on disability type, caregiver or assistant contacts and location in case of emergency. Although personal data protection is recognized as a challenge, participants believe that legal frameworks will allow for data processing within the civil protection system.

Another major challenge is the lack of public awareness. There is a clear need for comprehensive and well-structured media campaigns to inform citizens about the presence and needs of people with disabilities within their communities. Raising awareness can help foster a more supportive environment and encourage individuals to be better prepared to assist their neighbors in emergency situations.

When asked about the **biggest challenges** in implementing disaster preparedness education, participants most frequently identified low public awareness (65.7%), limited training capacity and resources (62.9%), lack of funding (60%) and low public interest (54.3%). One respondent additionally noted that even when training initiatives exist, poor coordination and communication between sectors can lead to duplication of efforts and materials without effective real-world implementation. The results show that all identified challenges are reported at relatively similar rates suggesting that barriers to disaster preparedness education are versatile and interconnected, rather than driven by one primary issue.

Training materials and methods should be adapted to ensure clarity, simplicity and accessibility. For example, many documents intended for blind or visually impaired individuals are still not compatible with screen readers, which creates a significant barrier to accessing essential information. Ensuring that all materials follow accessibility standards, such as structured formatting, clear language and compatibility with assistive technologies, is a fundamental step toward inclusive training. For people with intellectual disabilities, information should be presented in a clear, concise and structured

manner, avoiding complex terminology. Repetition, visual aids and practical demonstrations can improve understanding and memory. Training sessions should also allow enough time for comprehension and encourage interactive participation. While some online courses exist, they are limited in scope and do not adequately meet the diverse learning needs of these populations. It is noted that existing materials (like from the SEE ME and SEE ME 2 projects) have not reached the institution, indicating a gap in distribution and accessibility of educational resources.

Stakeholders also express **willingness to cooperate and engage** in activities focused on preparing more persons with disabilities for crisis situations. It is also noted that general civil protection personnel are currently not sufficiently trained to assist persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups, highlighting the need for additional specialized training. Groups that currently receive more attention in this area are deaf people and people with hearing disabilities, persons with paraplegia and persons on the autism spectrum. However, there is still a lack of clear guidance and training on how to approach persons with autism and intellectual disabilities, particularly in situations requiring rapid response and physical contact. Participants believe that further systematic training and the development of clear operational protocols are needed. Some NGOs and humanitarian organizations are mentioned as providers of trainings that focus on preparing people with disabilities for crisis situations, however these initiatives are not long-term, systematically structured or consistently active. It is proposed that existing programs and exercises should include more content related to working with persons with disabilities. There is particular interest among general civil protection units in thematic exercises focused specifically on rescuing and assisting persons with disabilities in crisis situations. Stakeholders emphasize that such training programs do not currently exist in Croatia and view related initiatives positively. While the existing legal framework and strategic documents formally recognize the needs of persons with disabilities, significant implementation challenges remain.

Participants also described **existing training programs** for emergency services in responding to large-scale accidents and crises, while noting challenges in coordination at incident sites. Emergency services lack knowledge on how to adapt evacuation procedures for example for persons with visual impairments, while staff of the institution also lack knowledge of emergency procedures. Difficulties are reported in organizing response activities at assembly points, especially in adverse weather conditions or when there is a risk of individuals wandering away, such as persons with Alzheimer's disease or intellectual disabilities. A lack of trained personnel who could remain with individuals requiring additional support after evacuation is also highlighted, as emergency responders must continue their interventions. This highlights the need for a jointly developed approach that would enable meaningful and adapted training and evacuation exercises for persons with disabilities, with active involvement of all relevant stakeholders. As a possible solution, the involvement of specially trained volunteers and crisis teams is suggested to provide post-intervention support. One respondent specifically emphasized the need for systematic and targeted training of individuals who work directly with persons with disabilities, in order to shorten the chain of information transfer and ensure that knowledge and experience are shared in a clear and effective way.

Regarding the **availability of information and training**, participants believe that the public and organizations are not sufficiently informed about existing opportunities. Although some materials are available online, they are often described as too extensive, insufficiently adapted and not easily accessible to end users. Greater dissemination through media, press conferences, leaflets and cooperation with associations is proposed, with an emphasis on clear and concise information. Participants also highlight the importance of cooperation with local organizations, while being aware of challenges such as limited financial and organizational capacities. Strengthening cooperation

through direct contacts, joint activities and inclusion of crisis preparedness topics in city-funded projects is recommended. It is also noted that involving all organizations and persons with disabilities at once is not realistic, but even partial inclusion would represent a significant step forward. Participants emphasize that it is important to bring civil protection activities closer to persons with disabilities themselves, their families and organizations and to strengthen personal responsibility and preparedness for crisis situations. Continuous public information through the media and efforts to familiarize persons with disabilities with services and emergency procedures are seen as important, as this increases cooperation and reduces fear during interventions.

2.3 Germany

2.3.1 Organizational Structure & Key Actors

The term *Bevölkerungsschutz* (civil protection) in Germany encompasses all measures and responsibilities aimed at protecting the population in crisis and disaster situations. This includes both civil defense at the federal level as well as disaster management, which falls under the responsibility of the federal states and municipalities. The system is characterized by a complex interaction between different administrative levels and involves a wide range of governmental and non-governmental actors. A key feature of this structure is its federal organization, which ensures a clear allocation of responsibilities while simultaneously requiring close and coordinated cooperation between the federal, state, and local levels.

Crisis and disaster management in Germany is based on the federal structure of the state. Responsibilities are clearly divided between the federal government, the federal states, and municipalities, and are guided by the principle of subsidiarity. This principle states that tasks should be carried out at the lowest governmental level capable of performing them. Only when the capacities at that level are insufficient are higher levels involved in a supporting role.

A fundamental distinction is made between:

- **Civil defense**, which falls under the responsibility of the federal government and is aimed at protecting the population in defense or crisis situations (e.g., war)
- **Disaster management**, which is the responsibility of the federal states and includes hazard prevention and response to natural disasters and largescale emergencies in peacetime

The legal basis is provided by the *Zivilschutz- und Katastrophenhilfegesetz* (ZSKG), which defines the framework for cooperation between the different levels of government.

In practice, there is a close interlinkage between these two areas: the federal government provides resources, concepts, and supplementary equipment, while the federal states and municipalities are responsible for operational implementation. In line with the principle of subsidiarity, higher-level authorities intervene only in a supportive capacity, for example in the case of disasters of national significance.

The **structure of civil protection** in Germany is characterized by a clear distribution of responsibilities:

a. Federal Level

The federal government is responsible for civil defense. The central institution is the Federal Office of Civil Protection and Disaster Assistance¹⁷ (*BBK*), which operates within the portfolio of the Federal

¹⁷ <https://www.bbk.bund.de>

Ministry of the Interior. Its tasks include the development of strategies and concepts, public warning systems (e.g., alert systems), the promotion of self-protection and prevention, as well as supporting the federal states through equipment and training. In addition, the federal government can provide further resources when needed, for example through the Federal Agency for Technical Relief (*THW*), the Federal Police, and the German Armed Forces (*Bundeswehr*).

b. State Level

The federal states bear the primary responsibility for disaster management in peacetime. The respective Ministries of the Interior function as the highest disaster management authorities and coordinate measures at the state level. They are responsible for legal regulations in disaster management, the planning and organization of response structures, and the coordination of major emergency situations.

c. Municipal Level

Operational implementation takes place at the municipal level, carried out by districts and independent cities as lower disaster management authorities, along with local emergency services and organizations.

d. Response Organizations and Volunteering

Non-governmental organizations also play a central role, carrying out a large proportion of operational tasks. These include in particular:

- Fire services (professional and volunteer)
- *German Red Cross (DRK)*
- *Johanniter-Unfall-Hilfe (Johanniter International Assistance)*
- *Malteser Hilfsdienst (Malteser International)*
- *Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund (ASB – Workers' Samaritan Federation Germany)*
- *Deutsche Lebens-Rettungs-Gesellschaft (DLRG – German Life Saving Association)*

These organizations perform essential operational duties and are to a large extent shaped by volunteer engagement.

2.3.2 Current State of Disaster Preparedness Education

The results from the L4R survey show that disaster preparedness education is perceived as **existing but not as highly advanced**, with assessments being heterogeneous and concentrated in the mid-range of a five-point scale (1 = very underdeveloped, 5 = very advanced). The mean value of 2.9 indicates an overall moderate level of development. The distribution of ratings reflects this nuanced picture: 42.9% of respondents rated the state at level 3, while 21.4% assigned it level 4, and another 21.4% rated it at level 2. A very low rating (level 1) was given by 14.3% of respondents, with no ratings at level 5. This suggests a general perception of disaster preparedness education as neither highly developed nor completely lacking, but rather fragmented and inconsistent.

The qualitative interviews confirm this tendency and provide a more in-depth classification of the structural framework conditions. Existing structures are predominantly described as fragmented and **highly dependent on the commitment of individual actors**. Systematic and institutionally secured coordination is only recognizable to a limited extent. Furthermore, it becomes apparent that existing offerings are often not sufficiently designed to be integration-sensitive. Actors from integration work in particular report difficulties in accessing existing structures, which are described as lacking

transparency and being difficult to identify. Overall, this suggests that the issue is less a complete absence of disaster preparedness education and more an insufficient structural coherence and lack of coordination between relevant fields of action.

The results of the quantitative survey indicate that various **programs and measures** in the field of disaster preparedness education do exist in the municipalities examined. The offerings mentioned by respondents focus primarily on traditional formats such as first aid courses, exercises and simulations mainly for authorities or organizations, and information campaigns. These forms of knowledge transfer and awareness-raising constitute the core of existing educational activities and reflect a predominantly practice- and application-oriented approach. At the same time, several respondents report knowing no or only very few programs. This discrepancy between the existence of relevant measures and their perception by relevant actors indicates limited visibility and reach of existing offerings. It can therefore be inferred that existing programs are not communicated sufficiently or not conveyed in a target-group-oriented manner.

The analysis of the question regarding **accessibility for different target groups** shows that perceptions of reachability and potential willingness to participate vary considerably between groups. Clear differences emerge between more strongly and more weakly addressed target groups. This is particularly evident for **refugees and migrants**. In this group, ratings are predominantly concentrated at the lower end of the scale. The largest proportion of responses falls into the lowest rating category ("1 – poor"), while higher ratings are only rarely assigned. This distribution indicates that, in the respondents' assessment, this group has the lowest level of accessibility to existing disaster preparedness education offerings and is therefore the least reached. A comparable pattern emerges for **people with disabilities and older people**. Here too, low to moderate ratings predominate, indicating structural barriers and limited integration of these groups into existing offerings. Although higher ratings are occasionally present, the overall assessment reflects rather low accessibility. These groups can therefore be understood as a cluster of target groups that are insufficiently addressed within the current system of disaster preparedness education. In contrast, a distinctly different rating distribution is observed for the target group of **women**. Here, assessments are relatively evenly distributed, with a stronger concentration in the middle to higher range of the scale. Low ratings are present but do not dominate the overall picture. This distribution suggests that women, compared to other target groups, are not perceived as structurally disadvantaged or difficult to reach.

The qualitative interviews further provide key explanatory factors for the overall limited participation. It becomes evident that low participation cannot primarily be interpreted as a lack of interest. Rather, the perception of lacking responsibility plays a decisive role. Many potential participants as well as actors within relevant organizations do not see themselves as part of disaster preparedness education and assume that they cannot contribute themselves. This perception is closely linked to the structural separation between disaster response and integration work. Actors in integration work often do not consider themselves responsible for disaster preparedness issues, while disaster response actors only marginally consider migration-specific perspectives. This lack of linkage results in relevant target groups neither being systematically addressed nor actively involved. This lack of target-group-specific communication and appropriate access pathways to effectively reach different groups of actors leads to the fact that existing programs are frequently not sufficiently tailored to the needs of specific target groups, which further restricts their uptake.

Overall, the results demonstrate that demand for disaster preparedness offerings cannot be considered in isolation but is closely linked to issues of accessibility, communication, and structural

integration. This is particularly evident in the strongly divergent ratings of individual target groups, which indicate significant inequalities in reachability and integration within existing systems.

Another key aspect concerns the conceptual level. The interviews repeatedly point out the **absence of concrete concepts for the practical implementation of disaster preparedness education**. This applies in particular to the question of how offerings must be designed to effectively reach different target groups. In addition, there is uncertainty regarding the structural contexts in which measures should take place, for example when, where, and within which organizational frameworks educational offerings can be meaningfully implemented.

Deficits are also evident at the **strategic level**. Although a general political will to further develop disaster preparedness education is perceived, corresponding strategies are often still in development. Clear operationalization and binding implementation structures are lacking in many cases, preventing existing objectives from being translated into concrete measures.

In summary, the results point less to a general lack of programs and more to deficits in their visibility, networking, and connectivity. Existing offerings do not appear to be sufficiently embedded in social and institutional structures, which significantly limits their reach and effectiveness. The analysis illustrates that the challenges of disaster preparedness education should not be viewed in isolation but rather as an expression of a complex structural problem. This problem is characterized by an interplay of insufficient public awareness, limited organizational resources, inadequate conceptual design, and insufficient networking between key fields of action.

2.3.3 Key Initiatives & Good Practice Examples

Disaster prevention within civil protection encompasses a broad range of measures aimed at minimizing risks and improving the management of crisis situations. These measures take place both at the governmental level and within civil society and complement each other. It becomes evident that structural precautionary measures alone are not sufficient to sustainably strengthen the resilience of the population. Rather, the effectiveness of these measures largely depends on the extent to which the population is informed about risks, protective measures, and appropriate courses of action.

A central component of disaster prevention is therefore **public education and awareness**. Governmental structures such as early warning systems, emergency plans, or infrastructural protective measures can only achieve their full effect if citizens are able to understand them and respond appropriately in the event of an emergency. The communication of relevant knowledge and skills is thus a fundamental prerequisite for an effective civil protection system.

The offerings regarding disaster preparedness education mentioned by survey respondents and interviewees focus primarily on traditional formats such as **first aid courses, exercises and simulations mainly for authorities or organizations, and information campaigns**. These forms of knowledge transfer and awareness-raising constitute the core of existing educational activities and reflect a predominantly practice- and application-oriented approach. At the same time, several respondents report knowing no or only very few programs. This discrepancy between the existence of relevant measures and their perception by relevant actors indicates limited visibility and reach of existing offerings. It can therefore be inferred that existing programs are not communicated sufficiently or not conveyed in a target-group oriented manner.

Within the context of educational efforts, **different levels of disaster prevention** can be identified. First, the promotion of individual self-protection capabilities plays a central role. The aim is to enable individuals to independently take precautionary measures, assess risks, and act responsibly in crisis

situations. This includes, for example, knowledge of emergency preparedness, appropriate behavior during natural disasters, and basic first aid skills. This form of prevention not only strengthens individuals but also has a stabilizing effect on their immediate social environment, such as families and households. In addition, neighborhood support is becoming increasingly important. In many disaster situations, people initially rely on assistance from their immediate surroundings. In this context, the concept of spontaneous assistance also plays an important role.

Another key pillar of disaster prevention is **voluntary engagement within civil protection**. In Germany, the relevant organizations make a significant contribution to coping with crises. At the same time, the question arises as to the extent to which these structures are open and accessible to new target groups and whether they offer sufficient opportunities for integration. This is particularly important in light of social diversity and changing demographic conditions.

In Germany, a number of disaster prevention measures exist across different levels of government that can be considered best practices.

At the **federal level**, a focus lies on overarching information, awareness raising, and technical infrastructure. This includes, in particular, the information and educational materials provided by the *Federal Office of Civil Protection and Disaster Assistance (BBK)*, such as the **guide “Emergency Preparedness for Crisis and Disaster Situations”**¹⁸, which provides fundamental recommendations for action in various crisis scenarios and is now also available in multiple languages. In addition, the **nationwide warning day** plays a central role, during which warning systems are tested. The aim is to reach the population comprehensively, raise awareness of warning signals, and build trust in these systems. These measures form the basis for disseminating disaster preparedness across the population. Furthermore, budgets and materials are provided to relief organizations, for example to conduct first aid courses that include self-protection components, although their reach remains limited.

At the **state level**, these nationwide approaches are transferred and adapted to a regional context. Examples include **statewide action days** that contribute to further raising public awareness and draw on national content. In addition, approaches and systems can be found here that can be implemented at both the state and municipal levels, such as **KATHelferPro**¹⁹. These systems enable the integration of volunteers from the population to coordinate spontaneous helpers in disaster situations. At the same time, their use is associated with additional effort, as such systems must not only be procured but also regularly practiced, requiring resources in terms of personnel, time, and funding.

At the **municipal level**, the focus is on direct communication with and involvement of the population. Formats such as **Blaulichttage** (e.g., in Berlin²⁰) provide low threshold access by allowing emergency response organizations to present their work and engage with citizens. In addition, project-based initiatives can be identified at this level, such as **KLUG e. V.**²¹, which currently **develops concepts and provides training for heat guides** at the local and municipal level. Furthermore, approaches that promote active participation are implemented at this level, for example through the **integration of spontaneous volunteers**.

¹⁸ Download link: https://www.bbk.bund.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/EN/Mediathek/Publikationen/ratgeber-englisch_download.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=12

¹⁹ <https://www.kathelfer-pro.de/>

²⁰ Events like this can be found here: <https://www.berlin.de/bevoelkerungsschutz/service/veranstaltungen/>

²¹ <https://www.klimawandel-gesundheit.de/>

Target Group–Specific Best Practices for Migrants

In addition to general approaches to disaster prevention, an increasing number of target group–specific projects can be identified that aim to actively include vulnerable population groups—including migrants—in risk preparedness. These projects represent important best practices, as they follow an inclusive approach and seek to reduce existing barriers to access.

A prominent example is the project **“RESILIENT VOICES – Strengthening Vulnerable Groups through Risk Governance”**²², which is funded under the Erasmus+ programme. The aim of the project is to more strongly involve vulnerable groups in decision-making processes related to disaster preparedness and to actively consider their perspectives. It recognizes that certain population groups—including individuals in precarious social situations and those with limited access to information—are particularly affected by climate related risks. The project follows a participatory approach by first systematically identifying the needs and perceptions of the affected groups and subsequently translating them into concrete measures in cooperation with decisionmakers. Of particular relevance is the development of culturally sensitive and low threshold communication strategies that are specifically tailored to hard-to-reach groups. Through formats such as workshops, interviews, and a final European guideline, the project contributes to establishing more inclusive structures in risk management in the long term.²³

Another relevant example is the project **“ERDAI – Empowering Resilience through Digital Approaches and Inclusion”**²⁴, which is also implemented under Erasmus+. This project operates at the intersection of digitalization, education, and inclusion and aims to strengthen resilience competencies in heterogeneous learning environments. The focus here is particularly on the development of innovative educational formats, including digital learning approaches and so-called serious games, which convey complex topics such as climate change, crisis management, and disaster preparedness in a practical and accessible way. This approach creates new forms of access that are particularly suitable for individuals with diverse educational backgrounds and learning prerequisites. In the context of migrants as a target group, this project is particularly relevant because it:

- addresses heterogeneous learning prerequisites
- enables low threshold digital access
- strengthens education as a key factor for resilience

At the national level, initial project-based approaches can also be identified. One example is the **disaster prevention and migration project** of the *German Red Cross (Berlin Regional Association)*, which is partly funded by *Glücksspirale*. This project aims to specifically involve migrants in preventive measures and to provide them with knowledge and skills for action in disaster situations. Such initiatives are particularly noteworthy, as they represent early attempts to address the target group not only in the context of integration or volunteering, but explicitly within the field of disaster preparedness and self-protection education.

2.3.4 Challenges & Gaps

Spontaneous Volunteers

²² <https://dkkv.org/erasmusplus/>

²³ <https://dkkv.org/en/erasmus-plus/>

²⁴ <https://dkkv.org/erasmusplus/>

The growing frequency and intensity of crises and disasters due to climate change is increasing pressure on professional and volunteer response structures in Germany, pushing them toward their capacity limits. This shift has highlighted the rising importance of **spontaneous volunteers**—individuals from the general public who offer support during emergencies without prior integration into formal structures. While civil protection actors are developing strategies to better integrate these volunteers, their involvement introduces new challenges in training, coordination, and safe integration of untrained groups. Additionally, **migrants** are often viewed as recipients of aid rather than as **potential resources**, despite their valuable multilingual skills, intercultural competencies, and local networks.

Discussions with responsible volunteer coordination bodies made it clear that structural prerequisites for low-threshold integration are often lacking. Linguistic requirements, formal obligations, and the perceived burden associated with additional responsibilities represent significant barriers. At the same time, it is acknowledged that many cultures exhibit strong neighborhood-based and informal engagement, which follows different logics than institutionalized volunteering and therefore cannot be easily transferred into existing structures. Formal volunteer engagement in crisis or disaster response is primarily observed among individuals who either already had relevant interest or prior knowledge in their country of origin or who developed a pronounced need during the process of flight, arrival, and integration to give something back to the receiving society after having received extensive support themselves. This motive of reciprocity was identified as central in several interviews.

Comprehensive Inclusive Disaster Preparedness

A **paradigm shift** is emerging in civil protection, moving away from homogeneous, top-down approaches toward participatory, inclusive, and target-group-specific formats. However, these initiatives remain project-based, locally focused, and not systematically embedded in the broader civil protection system. After funding periods end, successful approaches are often discontinued, leading to gaps in knowledge and continuity. While suitable methods for inclusive disaster prevention exist, they are not widely disseminated or structurally anchored, particularly for migrants, who lack a comprehensive, nationwide educational strategy.

There is often a lack of target-group-specific communication and appropriate access pathways to effectively reach different groups of actors. Existing programs are frequently not sufficiently tailored to the needs of specific target groups, which further restricts their uptake.

Structural & Conceptual Challenges

Structural and conceptual gaps further hinder progress. The **heterogeneity of migrants** complicates the development of standardized educational formats, while **multilingualism and limited German proficiency** make existing monolingual, technically complex materials inaccessible. The broad definition of "migrants" as a target group risks overgeneralization, reducing the effectiveness of measures. Additionally, disaster prevention is not systematically integrated into migration, integration, or asylum services, despite these structures having direct access to the target group. Many civil protection initiatives still assume an "average population", failing to account for linguistic, cultural, or social differences, which leaves migrants only partially reached.

A **lack of interconnection** between integration, education, and civil protection systems results in fragmented outreach. Limited interfaces between disaster response and integration work mean that migrants are often not reached by existing programs, and resources are not used efficiently.

While low public interest and awareness are frequently cited challenges, qualitative interviews suggest that the issue is less about disinterest and more about insufficient awareness and personal relevance. Low participation is thus linked to **lack of information and limited perception of responsibility**.

Organizational challenges are also evident. Limited personnel resources hinder the development of target-group-specific offerings, and there is a shortage of staff who combine technical expertise in disaster response with linguistic and intercultural competencies. This structural separation means that many stakeholders do not feel addressed, leading to gaps in implementation, particularly for migration-related target groups. Overall, the challenges in Germany are not due to a lack of programs but to deficits in visibility, networking, and connectivity, with existing offerings not sufficiently embedded in social and institutional structures.

2.4 Poland

2.4.1 Organizational Structure & Key Actors

Poland's **security**²⁵ has taken on paramount importance in the current geopolitical context, as the country finds itself on the front line of NATO and the EU, facing direct hybrid threats from the Russian Federation, including disinformation, cyberattacks, and migration crises. Since 2022, Poland has operated in a new security reality, shaped by its proximity to the war in Ukraine, its borders with Belarus and Russia, and its role as a logistics hub for Ukraine. Deputy Minister of National Defence Cezary Tomczyk has described Poland as being in a state of hybrid war, with cognitive warfare—aimed at undermining trust in the government and fostering hostility—already underway. This context has exposed years of neglect in civil protection, particularly at the local level, where preparedness for crises has been severely lacking.

The Act of 5 December 2024 on Civil Protection and Civil Defence was enacted in response to long-standing systemic shortcomings; from 1 January 2025, it establishes a new organizational, operational and financial framework for civil protection and civil defense in Poland. The reform organizes and clarifies responsibilities across central and local governments, provides a legal basis for financing and planning, and integrates civil protection into the national crisis management system. A key change is the strengthened role of districts, where district administrators are now responsible for warning and alerting the public, while the State Fire Service provides operational support. The system also leverages existing rescue structures to improve response times and coordination.

The reform marks a **shift from reactive to proactive crisis management**, emphasizing social resilience and the responsibilities of citizens, not just their rights. However, the current definition of social resilience remains outdated, focusing narrowly on self-sufficiency and cooperation with authorities rather than a broader, community-driven approach. As Prof. Halina Strzelecka, a Warsaw Uprising veteran, emphasized: *"Train, train, and train again, because when the time of trial comes, it will be too late to acquire knowledge."*²⁶

Organizational Structure

²⁵ <https://www.gov.pl/web/rcb>; <https://www.gov.pl/web/mswia>; <https://www.gov.pl/web/obrona-narodowa>

²⁶ Round table discussions Equality – Cooperation - Security (18.04.2026)

Poland's civil protection system operates on a **multi-tiered system comprising the local, district, regional and national levels.**

1. Municipal Level (Basic):

- Closest to residents, responsible for planning, direct response, resource management, and public information on threats.

2. County Level (Intermediate):

- Collates information from municipalities and coordinates resources, ensuring faster data flow to the provincial level.

3. Provincial Level:

- The provincial governor coordinates the implementation of civil protection and civil defense tasks within the province, whilst the provincial marshal carries out the tasks falling within the remit of the provincial government. The provincial governor is responsible for building regional resilience, mobilizing resources in advance, and integrating institutional and community structures.

In peacetime, the system functions as **civil protection**, focusing on safeguarding life, health, property, infrastructure, and the environment from natural and man-made disasters. In the event of martial law or war, it transforms into **civil defense**, operating alongside the Polish Armed Forces, which are responsible for defending against external threats. During martial law and in the event of war, civil protection becomes civil defense, and the authorities, bodies and resources of civil protection become, respectively, the authorities, bodies and resources of civil defense. The Act also provides for a civil defense corps, administered by the Minister responsible for home affairs.

The system also integrates emergency services (State Fire Service, Volunteer Fire Service), NGOs, and civil society, which are considered the foundation of national resilience.

Key Actors

Poland's **civil protection system** involves a diverse range of entities, including:

- Government Security Centre (RCB)
- Units of the State Fire Service (PSP)
- Volunteer Fire Service (OSP)
- In-house fire brigades,
- Inspection bodies and fire brigades,
- Institute of Meteorology and Water Management – National Research Institute (IMGW-PIB),
- Polish Waters,
- State Forests,
- emergency call centers, healthcare providers involved in the Emergency Medical Services (EMS),
- Mountain and water rescue services, Polish Red Cross (PCK),
- Scout and guide organizations,
- Caritas Polska,

- ASAR (Aeronautical Search and Rescue) and SAR (Search and Rescue), as well as designated entities, those covered by the agreement or recognized by a decision of a civil protection authority

These entities are categorized as ‘specifically named’ or group-based, with an open-ended catalog that allows for expansion as needed. Their **key functions** include the protection of life, health, and property; warning and alerting the public; conducting rescue operations; organizing evacuations and humanitarian aid; cooperation between administration, services, and community organizations; and post-crisis reconstruction.

Public institutions (village heads, mayors, county and provincial governors, and the Minister of Internal Affairs) are responsible for evacuation and shelter plans, infrastructure management, and service coordination. The **Armed Forces** safeguard state sovereignty and independence, while emergency services (fire, police, medical) focus on saving lives, protecting health and property, and providing shelter. **Civil society organizations** play a vital role in supporting or organizing relief efforts, leveraging their speed, flexibility, and direct access to those in need.

Legal Framework and Crisis Management

Poland’s crisis management system is governed by **key legal documents**. The **Crisis Management Act (2007)** defines obligations of public administration, response principles, and the structure of the crisis management system from local to national levels, emphasizing risk prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery.

The **National Crisis Management Plan (KPZK)**, developed by the Government Security Centre, includes a catalog of threats, response procedures, division of responsibilities, and cooperation between services and administration. It is updated at least every two years or as needed due to new threats, lessons learned, or legislative changes, and covers all stages of crisis management: prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery. Recent updates include psychological support post-crisis, water pollution risks, mass migration risks, hybrid threat countermeasures, and updated evacuation and information-sharing procedures.

The **Report on National Security Threats** is a strategic document analyzing risks and forecasting threats, identifying preventive measures. The **Act on Civil Protection and Civil Defence (2024)** develops the civil protection system and prepares citizens for crises, focusing on increasing societal resilience, public education, warning system development, and cooperation between administration, services, and citizens.

Risk Classification and Hybrid Threats

The KPZK (National Crisis Management Plan) classifies **21 hazards** by risk level, with epidemics, floods, and ICT. The KPZK uses its own risk matrix with the following categories: minimal, low, medium, high and extreme. Hybrid operations, as described by Deputy Minister Cezary Tomczyk, include violations of Polish airspace, migrant pressure on the Belarusian border, cyber threats, and attacks on critical infrastructure. Experts warn that hybrid warfare could escalate to include mass attacks on the population, destruction of critical infrastructure, or radioactive or chemical contamination.

Cognitive warfare is another critical concern. As noted by Prof. Irena Lipowicz during the round table discussions Equality – Cooperation - Security (18.04.2026), “Poland is operating in a climate of cognitive warfare waged against the state and society, the aim of which is to manipulate beliefs,

polarize society and undermine trust in institutions.” False news, propaganda, and psychological operations aim to undermine trust in institutions, lower morale, and disrupt public sentiment. Military experts consider cognitive warfare the sixth battlefield, alongside land, sea, air, cyberspace, and outer space.

Programs and Public Systems

To enhance public preparedness, Poland has implemented several **key programs and systems**. **ALERT RCB** provides SMS alerts for immediate threats and rapid dissemination of safety instructions. The **RCB Safety Guides** offer educational materials to prepare households and teach emergency responses. The **RCB Safety Academy** focuses on educational films, misinformation countering, and resilience-building initiatives. The **State Ambulance Service** ensure rapid medical assistance and coordination of rescue operations, while the **National Rescue and Fire Service (KSRG)** handles fire, flood, and disaster response. The **Public Warning and Alert System** uses alarm sirens, radio/TV announcements, SMS alerts, and online notifications.

Poland’s **civil protection and crisis management system is undergoing a fundamental transformation**, driven by legal reforms, lessons from recent crises, and the evolving security landscape. While progress has been made in structural organization, funding, and public engagement, challenges such as hybrid threats, cognitive warfare, and coordination gaps persist. The system’s effectiveness will depend on continued reforms, better inter-agency cooperation, and a shift toward proactive, inclusive resilience-building. As Prof. Halina Strzelecka aptly put it, preparation through training and education is not just a recommendation—it is a necessity.

2.4.2 Current State of Disaster Preparedness Education

The results from the L4R survey show that the current state of disaster preparedness education in Poland is perceived as **severely underdeveloped**, with 71.4% of respondents rating it as very underdeveloped (scores 1 and 2 on a five-point scale). Only 14.3% rated it as moderately developed (score 3), and another 14.3% as rather developed (score 4). No respondent selected the highest rating (5), indicating a strong consensus on the need for significant improvement.

The **actors** most involved in disaster preparedness education are:

- Local government and administration — 71.4%.
- NGOs and community organizations — 64.3%.
- Schools and universities — 25%.
- Aid organizations — 17.9%.
- Private sector (e.g., companies offering training for employees) — 14.3%.
- Adult education providers — 7.1%.

Despite the involvement of these actors, coordination between stakeholders is perceived as poor, with 60.7% of respondents rating it as very low (scores 1 and 2). This lack of coordination suggests inefficient collaboration and a fragmented approach to disaster preparedness education.

When asked what is **already working well**, responses were mixed and often critical. Some respondents highlighted training sessions, talks, and immediate responses from local authorities as positive elements. Others mentioned voluntary activities, such as aid organization and cooperation between the Volunteer Fire Brigade (OSP), Rural Women’s Association (KGW), and local authorities.

However, many respondents stated that "nothing" is working well, or that coordination and communication remain insufficient. One respondent noted that spontaneous citizen initiatives ("SPONTAN") driven by empathy and solidarity during crises are more effective than structured efforts.

Existing programs and initiatives in Poland are fragmented and unevenly distributed. Some municipalities have implemented crisis management plans, stress tests, and lectures, often initiated by mayors or local authorities. The National Recovery Plan (KPO) and training organized by non-governmental organizations (NGOs)—such as the Rural Women's Association (KGW)—are mentioned, but their scope appears limited. Other initiatives include safety guides, joint training sessions between the State Fire Service (PSP) and Volunteer Fire Service (OSP), and first aid training for residents and civil servants. However, many respondents reported no programs or initiatives at all, or were unaware of any. This suggests that disaster preparedness education is not systematically implemented and often depends on local, ad-hoc efforts rather than a cohesive national strategy.

Training programs in Poland **prioritize the following types of major incidents**: natural disasters (e.g., floods, earthquakes) (64%); technological failures or accidents (e.g., chemical spills, infrastructure failure) (50%); health emergencies (e.g., pandemics) (32%); human-induced incidents (e.g., terrorist attacks) (21.4%). This prioritization reflects a focus on natural and technological risks, which are likely the most relevant threats in many Polish municipalities.

The **types of learning opportunities currently offered** in Poland include: information campaigns (e.g., leaflets, posters, booklets, or guides) (78.6%); Workshops (39.3%); Community drills (32.1%); Simulations (28.6%); Peer-to-peer training (28.6%); Webinars (21.4%); Online courses (21.4%); On-site demonstrations (17.9%). Additionally, some respondents mentioned chats/talks and programs like the University of the Third Age as other formats. The dominance of information campaigns suggests a focus on passive dissemination of information, while interactive and practical formats (e.g., drills, simulations) are less common.

Public awareness of learning opportunities is also very low. 33.3% rated it as poor (1), 48.1% rated it as 2, only 7.4% rated it as neutral (3), and 11.1% as rather good (4). This suggests that most people are unaware of the learning opportunities available, further limiting the effectiveness of disaster preparedness education.

Accessibility of learning opportunities for vulnerable target groups is rated as poor to moderate across all groups:

- **Refugees and migrants**: 52% rated accessibility as poor (1), with 24% rating it as 2, and only 4% as excellent (5). This indicates that this group is the least reached by current efforts.
- **People with disabilities**: 48.1% rated accessibility as poor (1), with 33.3% rating it as 2, and only 3.7% as excellent (5).
- **Older people**: 35.7% rated accessibility as poor (1), with 32.1% rating it as 2, and 3.6% as excellent (5).
- **Women**: 38.5% rated accessibility as poor (1), with 26.9% rating it as 2, and 7.7% as excellent (5).

This data reveals that vulnerable groups are not adequately served by current disaster preparedness education, with refugees, migrants, and people with disabilities facing the greatest barriers.

2.4.3 Key Initiatives & Good Practice Examples

Safety Handbook

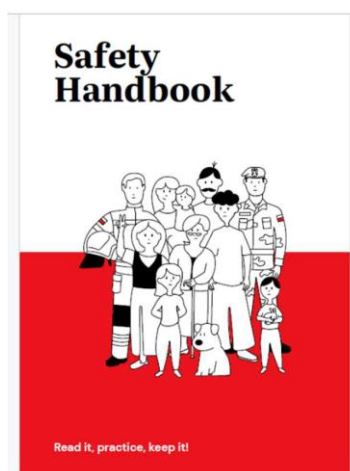


Figure 4: Cover Safety Handbook

The *Safety Handbook*²⁷ is a government initiative designed to prepare citizens for a wide range of threats, including cyberattacks, disinformation, natural disasters, military situations, and infrastructure crises. Its primary goal is to build social resilience and foster informed, community-driven responses to contemporary challenges, strengthening trust, solidarity, and collective preparedness.

Developed by the Ministry of National Defence, the Ministry of the Interior and Administration, and the Government Security Centre in collaboration with experts, local authorities, services, and NGOs, the guide provides practical advice on creating family emergency plans, evacuation procedures, emergency signals, and supply checklists. It addresses common threats such as flooding, fire, power outages, and military risks, focusing on preparation and response regardless of the cause.

The guide is based on:

- An analysis of national and international guides.
- NATO, EU, and UN guidelines.
- National legislation on defense, crisis management, civil protection, and civil defense.
- Consultations with local authorities, civil society organizations, and experts.

To ensure universal accessibility, the guide has been distributed in printed form to all households in Poland and is available online, in Braille, and in English and Ukrainian, reflecting the government's commitment to inclusive information sharing for people with disabilities and foreign nationals.

Local program “Warsaw Protects” (19115)

For 12 years, the Warsaw Municipal Contact Center 19115²⁸ has been a 24/7 resource for residents, providing quick and comprehensive access to the city and its services. By calling 19115, residents can obtain detailed information about the services offered by City Hall and municipal entities, report issues requiring attention, or even share ideas for improving the city. Additionally, the progress of reported issues can be monitored at all times, ensuring transparency and accountability in addressing citizen concerns.



Figure 5: Screenshot of “Warsaw Protects”

²⁷ Download link for the Safety Handbook (in English) on the website of the Polish Government Centre for Security: <https://www.gov.pl/attachment/4d6947da-a6b2-4890-83ef-b2c8eb4a11df>

²⁸ <https://warszawa19115.pl/>

Model for Accepting Refugees

In the first months of the war in Ukraine, over 1.1 million refugees passed through Warsaw, with a peak of up to 40,000 people arriving daily in February and March 2022. In response, Warsaw residents, NGOs, and city authorities rapidly established an effective aid system within just a few days. By 2025, Warsaw had become a second home for tens of thousands of Ukrainian citizens, hosting the largest refugee population in Poland. The city's success in preventing homelessness among refugees has made it a global model for refugee acceptance, driven primarily by the volunteer efforts and neighborly support of Warsaw's residents rather than a pre-existing system. Poland continues to provide aid; for example, in January 2026 it supplied Kyiv with 379 electricity generators and 18 heaters.

2.4.4 Challenges & Gaps

Poland's crisis management and civil protection system is undergoing **fundamental reforms**, driven by recent legislation and lessons from crises like the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the 2024 floods. The Act of 5 December 2024 on Civil Protection and Civil Defence, effective since 1 January 2025, marks a shift from a **reactive to a proactive, resilience-building model**. Key changes include decentralization with a stronger role for local authorities, stable funding (minimum 0.3% of GDP annually), modern civil defense infrastructure (e.g., dual-use shelters), and the integration of advanced technologies like alarm systems, records of resources and collective protection facilities. However, this transition phase brings organizational, technical, and social challenges, as the system evolves from a post-event response model to one based on proactive planning and citizen cooperation. Despite these reforms, challenges remain. The 2024 floods exposed weaknesses in the crisis management system, including decision-making paralysis and the 'blame game' between institutions. In practice, formal plans often became useless due to broken communications and information chaos, forcing decision-makers to improvise in a 'rescue logic' mode.

Despite these reforms, survey respondents point out that **disaster preparedness education remains underdeveloped**. No respondent rated it as highly advanced, and 42.9% cited low public awareness, 28.6% low public interest, and 17.9% lack of funding as the biggest challenges. Programs are fragmented and localized, with some municipalities implementing crisis management plans and training, while others have no initiatives at all. Coordination between stakeholders is poor (60.7% rated it as very low), leading to inefficiencies and gaps in coverage. The system's multi-tiered structure (local, district, provincial) is designed for complementary cooperation, but in reality, hierarchical rigidities and communication breakdowns persist. The provincial governor acts as a conduit for central government policies while also coordinating regional activities, but coordination gaps between central and local authorities remain a significant issue.

A critical **gap in inclusivity** persists, particularly for refugees, migrants, and people with disabilities, who are the least reached by current efforts. Accessibility ratings for these groups are predominantly poor, highlighting structural barriers in existing programs. Additionally, women face rising responsibilities and risks during crises, with calls for self-defense training and legal reforms to better support them.

Respondents emphasized the **need for structural and procedural improvements**, including clear regulations, defined responsibilities, and increased funding. Mandatory, periodic simulations and exercises tailored to local risks (e.g., forest fires, floods) were proposed, alongside cross-sectoral cooperation and psychological support during and after crises. Targeted educational programs for

vulnerable groups (e.g., older people, people with disabilities) and better communication—such as signposting evacuation routes and disseminating contact information—were also highlighted as priorities.

The dominance of information campaigns suggests a **passive approach** to disaster preparedness education, with fewer interactive or practical formats like drills or simulations. This over-reliance on passive dissemination limits the effectiveness of preparedness efforts. Furthermore, inefficient administration and lack of resource mapping (e.g., identifying equipment or personnel for emergencies) hinder operational readiness. For example, during crises, local authorities often lack knowledge of available resources, leading to delays and inefficiencies in response.

Overall, Poland's disaster preparedness education system is in its early stages, with significant structural, procedural, and awareness-related challenges. Addressing these issues will require coordinated, inclusive, and well-communicated efforts at all levels of government and society, alongside greater emphasis on practical, interactive training and targeted support for vulnerable groups.

2.5 Comparison - Key themes, challenges, and opportunities identified

Organizational Structures and Key Actors

Across **Austria, Croatia, Germany, and Poland**, disaster preparedness and civil protection systems are **multi-tiered**, with responsibilities distributed among **national, regional, and local authorities**. However, the degree of centralization and coordination varies significantly. All four countries follow a **holistic approach to disaster management**, typically structured into four phases: prevention, preparedness, response, recovery. **Key actors** across all countries are:

- **Government bodies** (e.g., Ministries of Interior, Defense, and Security Centers)
- **Emergency services** (fire brigades, police, medical services)
- **NGOs and civil society organizations** (Red Cross, Mountain Rescue, scouting organizations)
- **Volunteers** (critical in all 4 countries)
- **Local authorities** (mayors, district administrators, provincial governors)

A persistent tension exists between **decentralization and coordination** across all four countries. While decentralized systems, such as Croatia's 17 district headquarters or Poland's multi-tiered structure, enable localized and context-specific responses, they often create significant coordination challenges. This fragmentation can lead to inefficiencies, duplicated efforts, and gaps in coverage, particularly when local initiatives lack alignment with national strategies.

Another recurring issue is **hierarchical rigidities**, where communication breakdowns and mutual recriminations persist between central and local authorities. For instance, Poland's response to the 2024 floods revealed how formal plans became ineffective due to broken communication channels and information chaos, forcing decision-makers to improvise in a 'rescue logic' mode. Similarly, Germany's federal-state tensions highlight the difficulties in achieving seamless collaboration across different levels of government.

All four countries **heavily rely on volunteers** to supplement professional emergency services. However, structural prerequisites for their effective integration—such as training, language accessibility, and clear role definitions—are often lacking. This is particularly evident in Germany, where migrants and spontaneous volunteers possess valuable skills (e.g., multilingualism, intercultural competencies) but face barriers to participation, including linguistic requirements and formal obligations. Without addressing these gaps, the potential contributions of diverse volunteer groups remain underutilized.

Finally, **legal and strategic gaps** further complicate disaster preparedness. Outdated frameworks, such as Poland's pre-2025 civil protection laws, have historically hindered proactive planning and risk management, forcing systems to operate in a reactive rather than preventive mode. Even where reforms have been introduced, as in Poland's 2025 Act on Civil Protection and Civil Defence, the transition from old to new systems presents organizational, technical, and social challenges, particularly in ensuring that legal provisions translate into practical, on-the-ground preparedness.

Current State of Disaster Preparedness Education

The perception of disaster preparedness education varies across Austria, Croatia, Germany, and Poland, with **none of the countries viewing their systems as highly advanced**. In **Austria**, the system is widely regarded as underdeveloped, with local governments and aid organizations leading efforts, though coordination is often rated as neutral or uncertain. **Croatia** presents a more **moderate and divided perception, where NGOs and local governments play key roles, but coordination still requires improvement**. In **Germany**, disaster preparedness education is seen as existing but not advanced, suffering from fragmentation, limited visibility, and low public awareness. **Poland** has the most critical assessment, with a large majority considering it severely underdeveloped, despite strong involvement from local governments and NGOs, while coordination remains a significant weakness.

All four countries have implemented **targeted public awareness campaigns** to improve preparedness. Examples include Austria's "Safety Tour," Germany's nationwide "Warning Day," Poland's "Safety Guide," and Croatia's "School in Nature" program. Additionally, **alert systems** are widely used, with SMS alerts, sirens, and online platforms playing a central role. Poland's ALERT RCB, and Germany's nationwide warning day are key examples of these systems in action.

Despite these efforts, **common challenges** persist in disaster preparedness education. **Vulnerable groups**—such as refugees, migrants, and people with disabilities—are consistently the least reached across all countries. While women are perceived as less structurally disadvantaged, they still face gaps in tailored programs, as seen in Austria's neutral accessibility ratings and Poland's calls for self-defence training. Older people also receive mixed but generally low accessibility ratings.

A **dominance of passive formats**, such as information campaigns (e.g., leaflets, posters), is evident. However, interactive and practical formats, such as drills and simulations, are less common, which limits the effectiveness of preparedness efforts.

Another major issue is the **lack of target-group-specific programs**. Migrants often face language barriers and cultural differences, as seen in Germany's monolingual materials and Croatia's limited adapted resources. People with disabilities lack accessible materials, such as screen-reader compatibility and Braille. While children and youth are better served—for example, through Austria's Die Helfer Wiens school programs and Croatia's School in Nature—adults with disabilities remain underserved.

Finally, **low public awareness** is a recurring challenge, with 42.9% of respondents in Germany and 65.7% in Croatia citing it as a major barrier. Low participation in disaster preparedness programs is often linked to a lack of information and perceived irrelevance rather than disinterest, as observed in Germany and Poland. Addressing these gaps will require more inclusive, interactive, and widely communicated initiatives to ensure all segments of society are effectively reached and prepared.

Key Initiatives and Good Practices

Across the four countries, **participatory approaches** like Austria's KOPHIS and Germany's RESILIENT VOICES involve target groups in program design, ensuring tailored and effective measures. **Digital and multilingual resources**, such as Poland's Safety Handbook and Germany's BBK guides, expand accessibility for diverse populations. **School-based programs** like Austria's Safety Tour and Croatia's School in Nature foster early awareness and preparedness among children and youth. **Volunteer engagement** is another strength, with platforms like Austria's Team Österreich and Poland's 19115 system mobilizing both spontaneous and trained volunteers, integrating community involvement into broader preparedness frameworks. These practices highlight the importance of **inclusivity, innovation, and community engagement** in building disaster resilience.

Challenges and Gaps

Across the four countries, **structural and organizational challenges** significantly hinder effective disaster preparedness. **Fragmented systems** often lack systematic embedding into national strategies, as seen in Germany's project-based approaches and Poland's localized efforts, which can lead to inconsistencies and gaps in coverage. **Coordination gaps** further exacerbate these issues, with **poor inter-agency cooperation**—such as the 60.7% of respondents in Poland rating coordination as very low—resulting in inefficiencies and duplicated efforts. **Resource limitations** also pose significant obstacles, including lack of funding and personnel shortages, such as Croatia's 4,000 unfilled commissioner positions. Additionally, **legal and data barriers**, including GDPR restrictions in Croatia and outdated frameworks in Poland's pre-2025 laws, hinder data sharing and accessibility, complicating efforts to identify and support vulnerable populations.

In the realm of **education and awareness**, several gaps persist. **Low public awareness** remains a recurring challenge, with limited reach of programs and an over-reliance on passive dissemination methods, such as Poland's reliance on information campaigns. **Lack of inclusivity** is another critical issue, as vulnerable groups—including refugees, migrants, and people with disabilities—are systematically underserved due to language barriers, inaccessible materials, and cultural differences. **Training deficits** further limit effectiveness, as practical and interactive formats like drills and simulations are less common, reducing engagement and preparedness. Additionally, **conceptual weaknesses** are evident in the absence of comprehensive nationwide strategies for migrants or people with disabilities, particularly in Germany and Croatia.

Operational and practical challenges also undermine disaster preparedness efforts. **Improvisation in crises** is often necessary when formal plans fail due to communication breakdowns, as seen during Poland's 2024 floods and Croatia's incident site coordination. **Resource mapping gaps** further complicate response efforts, as local authorities often lack knowledge of available resources. **Psychological support** remains insufficient, with limited capacity for post-crisis mental health. Finally, the rise of **cognitive and hybrid threats**, including disinformation and cyberattacks, necessitates the development of new strategies to bolster public resilience against these evolving risks.

Opportunities for Improvement

Policy and Strategy:

- **Develop Comprehensive National Strategies:** Systematically embed disaster preparedness into legal frameworks (e.g., Poland's 2025 reforms, Germany's BBK initiatives).
- **Strengthen Coordination Mechanisms:** Improve inter-agency collaboration through clearer roles, shared databases, and joint exercises (e.g., Croatia's local commissioners, Austria's SKKM).
- **Increase Funding and Resources:** Allocate stable funding (e.g., Poland's 0.3% GDP for civil protection) and invest in infrastructure (e.g., on protective structures designed, where possible, to serve a dual purpose, modern technologies).

Education and Awareness:

- **Expand Target-Group-Specific Programs:** Tailor materials and training for migrants, people with disabilities, and seniors (e.g., Croatia's SEE ME projects, Germany's ERDAI).
- **Low-Threshold Formats:** Simplified language, visual aids, hands-on training
- **Promote Interactive Learning:** Increase drills, simulations, and hands-on training (e.g., Austria's Safety Tour, Poland's mandatory exercises).
- **Leverage Digital Tools:** Develop apps, online courses, and multilingual platforms (e.g., Poland's ALERT RCB, Austria's Team Österreich Digital).
- **Enhance Public Communication:** Use media campaigns, social media, and community engagement to raise awareness.

Inclusivity and Community Engagement:

- **Involve Vulnerable Groups in Design:** Co-create programs with people with disabilities, migrants, and women (e.g., Austria's KOPHIS, Germany's RESILIENT VOICES).
- **Strengthen Volunteer Networks:** Integrate spontaneous volunteers and migrants into formal structures (e.g., Austria's Team Österreich, Poland's 19115 system).
- **Address Psychological Needs:** Expand mental health support in crisis response (e.g., Poland's KPZK updates, Croatia's psychological intervention programs).

Operational Readiness:

- **Improve Resource Mapping:** Develop databases of equipment, personnel, and shelters (e.g., Croatia's reception area maps, Poland's evacuation plans).
- **Enhance Cross-Sectoral Cooperation:** Foster partnerships between government, NGOs, and private sector (e.g., Austria's KSÖ, Germany's KATHelferPro).
- **Prepare for Hybrid Threats:** Develop countermeasures for disinformation, cyberattacks, and cognitive warfare (e.g., Poland's RCB Safety Academy, Germany's BBK misinformation countering).

The **common themes** across Austria, Croatia, Germany, and Poland reveal a **shift toward proactive, inclusive, and resilient disaster preparedness systems**, but significant challenges remain. Structural fragmentation, coordination gaps, and limited inclusivity hinder effectiveness, while low public awareness, resource constraints, and operational deficiencies persist. However, best practices—such as participatory programs, digital tools, volunteer engagement, and school-based education—offer scalable solutions.

3. Requirements for Target Group-Oriented Learning Opportunities

Disaster preparedness training must be **tailored to the specific needs, barriers, and preferences** of diverse target groups to ensure **effectiveness, inclusivity, and accessibility**. Insights from interviews, workshops, and online surveys across Austria, Croatia, Germany, and Poland reveal common barriers, preferred formats, and key topics that should shape the design of future training programs. By addressing these elements, disaster preparedness initiatives can **overcome structural gaps, enhance engagement, and foster resilience** among vulnerable and underserved populations.

3.1 Barriers to Accessing Disaster Preparedness Training

A **lack of awareness and information** emerges as the **most significant barrier** across all countries. In Poland 37% and in Austria 28% of stakeholders as well as 46% of target group respondents reported not knowing where to find training opportunities, while in Germany, respondents stated that they were not aware of the existence of relevant training or information services, or that they lacked clear information on where such services could be found. Similarly, in Croatia, stakeholders noted that information often does not reach end users, particularly among persons with disabilities and migrants. This gap is exacerbated by weak intersectoral coordination and communication, as well as limited dissemination through accessible channels. Furthermore, a lack of adapted training and materials, as well as a general shortage of training programmes and a shortage of trained professionals and educators with the necessary competencies to work with the target groups and adequately address their specific needs, were mentioned.

Logistical and practical barriers also hinder participation. **Lack of time** is the most frequently cited obstacle in Croatia (57%) and Austria (44%), where respondents emphasized the need for short, flexible training formats that accommodate busy schedules. **Transportation and distance** to training venues pose additional challenges, particularly for older people, persons with disabilities, and rural populations. In Poland, difficulty in traveling and lack of local training opportunities were highlighted as key barriers, while in Croatia, 43,3% of respondents reported difficulties with transport or distance, underscoring the need for locally accessible or online formats.

Physical and cognitive limitations further restrict access. In Croatia, respondents noted that persons with visual impairments and intellectual disabilities face barriers due to inaccessible materials, lack of adapted training, and insufficient support from trained professionals. For example, screen-reader incompatibility, lack of audio materials, and complex terminology make it difficult for these groups to engage with existing programs.

Financial and organizational constraints also play a role. In Poland, costs and lack of digital skills were identified as barriers, while in Germany, financial constraints and language barriers limited participation. Free or low-cost training, local venues, and multilingual offerings were frequently suggested as solutions to improve accessibility.

Finally, **psychological and motivational barriers** cannot be overlooked. In Croatia, 40% of respondents reported an aversion to emergency topics, while in Poland 23,5% and in Austria 14% of respondents stated they do not want to engage with crisis-related content. This highlights the need for low-stress, adaptive formats as well as the importance of framing training in a positive, empowering manner and emphasizing practical, relatable benefits to encourage participation.

3.2 Preferred Training Formats and Topics

Across all countries, **practical, hands-on formats** are consistently preferred over theoretical or passive approaches. Survey respondents representing the target groups highly valued mixed theory-practice formats (Austria: 84%; Croatia: 86,67%; Poland 72,8%), practical exercises (Austria: 30%; Poland 49,4%) and group discussions (Austria: 38%; Poland 28,4%). Therefore, exercises, simulations, and workshops were the most frequently requested formats, reflecting a demand for experiential learning. It should be noted that seniors in Poland (29,6%) are also open to theory-based sessions with background information. Tactile and audio-based learning were identified as more effective for blind and visually impaired individuals, while simplified, easy-to-read materials were preferred for persons with intellectual disabilities.

Small group settings were also widely favoured, with 61.7% of Polish seniors preferring groups of up to 10 people, as well as 72% of Austrian respondents and 73,3% of Croatian respondents, in addition emphasizing the need for mini-groups with competent facilitators who understand the specific needs of participants. In Poland, seniors (25,9%) are also interested in group sessions with more than 10 people.

Short, flexible sessions are another key preference. In Croatia, 63% of respondents favoured a series of short sessions (up to 60 minutes) spread over several days, while in Poland, 40.7% of seniors and in Austria 30% preferred this format. Single short sessions one time only (Austria: 26%; Poland 35,8%) and **half-day trainings (4–5 hours)** were also popular (Austria: 30%; Croatia: 30%; Poland 18,5%), but full-day sessions were rarely selected, indicating a preference for gradual, manageable learning experiences. Regarding the **timing of training** this highly depends on the target group. Whereas seniors in Poland prefer weekday (59,3%) sessions in the morning (39,5%) or afternoon (40,7%), women in Austria prefer weekends (36%) or weekday (30%) evenings (46%), and people with visual impairment in Croatia prefer weekends and afternoons. This aligns with the need to accommodate working individuals and caregivers. Across all countries and target groups respondents agree that **experts like firefighters, paramedics, or emergency professionals** should run the trainings, but also taking into account people from local communities and target group-sensitive trainers

Online and hybrid formats are increasingly valued, particularly for reaching remote or mobility-limited populations. In Austria, recorded online training was selected by 54% and live online sessions by 30% of respondents, while in Poland, 16% of seniors preferred online formats. However, digital literacy remains a barrier, as noted in Poland and Germany, where lack of internet skills and limited access to technology were cited as obstacles. Thus, blended approaches—combining in-person and digital elements—may offer the best solution for broad accessibility.

When it comes to **training topics**, **evacuation procedures** emerged as the most demanded subject across all countries. In Croatia, 97% of respondents with visual impairments prioritized evacuation training, while in Poland, 69% of seniors expressed interest in evacuation and safe escape procedures. **First aid** was another highly requested topic, selected by 67% of Polish seniors and 53% of Croatian respondents. **Power outages** (Croatia: 53%; Poland 67%) and **fire safety** (Croatia: 53%; Poland 39,5%) were also frequently mentioned, reflecting a focus on practical, actionable skills that address immediate and common risks. **Fraud prevention** is in demand primarily among seniors in Poland (42%), who are also more interested in information how to **help others** (29,6%).

For **persons with disabilities**, psychosocial preparedness and communication in emergencies were critical themes. In Croatia, 80% of respondents emphasized the importance of **staying calm and**

making good decisions (Austria: 26%; Poland 42%), while 66,7% of respondents highlighted **emergency communication** as a key skill, similarly to 46% of Austrian respondents. Familiarization with emergency services and uniforms was also stressed, as persons with intellectual disabilities often experience fear or resistance when encountering unfamiliar authority figures.

3.3 Making Training More Inclusive and Accessible

To ensure **inclusivity and accessibility**, disaster preparedness training must address diverse needs and barriers through **adaptive design and delivery**. Language and cultural adaptation are critical, particularly for migrants and refugees. In Germany, multilingual materials and trainers were identified as essential, and culturally sensitive communication was emphasized to engage hard-to-reach groups. Low-threshold, practical formats—such as short sessions, small groups, and hands-on activities—were consistently preferred across all countries, as they reduce complexity and increase engagement.

Physical accessibility is another key consideration. Training venues should be locally accessible, with neighbourhood centres (Austria: 28%; Poland 63%), well-equipped facilities (e.g., fire stations) (Austria: 52%; Poland 40,7%) and local schools (Poland: 30,9%) close to home or workplace (Austria 52%; Poland 72,8%) being preferred locations. **Online options** should complement in-person training, particularly for those with mobility limitations or in remote areas. However, digital formats must be accompanied by support for participants with limited tech skills, such as assistance with device setup or guided tutorials.

Instructor qualifications play a crucial role in inclusivity. Across all countries and target groups respondents agree that **experts like firefighters, paramedics, or emergency professionals** should run the trainings. In Croatia, respondents stressed the need for **trainers with expertise in working with persons with disabilities**, including knowledge of assistive technologies and adaptive communication techniques. **Peer-led** or **community-based training** was also suggested as a way to build trust and relatability, particularly for migrants and older people.

Financial and organizational support can further enhance accessibility. **Free or low-cost training** was the most frequently requested enabler in Poland (69.1%) and Austria (78%), while **proximity to home or workplace** was another key factor. Childcare, transportation assistance, and flexible scheduling were also mentioned as supportive measures to remove logistical barriers.

Finally, **psychological and social considerations** must be integrated into training design. Building trust and familiarity with emergency services was a recurring theme, particularly for persons with disabilities and older people. In Croatia, stakeholders emphasized the need for long-term, direct contact between emergency responders and vulnerable groups to reduce fear and improve cooperation. Group-based learning, with social interaction and peer support, was also valued, as it fosters a sense of community and shared responsibility.

3.4 Recommendations

The results of the surveys demonstrate that there is a fundamental interest in crisis prevention; however, the actual use of services depends largely on their implementation and accessibility. The central challenge therefore lies less in a lack of demand and more in the target-group-oriented design

of prevention services. To create **effective, inclusive, and accessible disaster preparedness training**, the following cross-cutting recommendations emerge from the data:

1. **Prioritize Practical, Hands-On Learning**

Training should focus on interactive, experiential formats such as workshops, drills, and simulations, which are consistently preferred across all countries. Theory should be combined with practice to ensure application leads to understanding.

2. **Adapt to Diverse Needs and Abilities**

- For persons with disabilities, provide accessible materials (e.g., audio, Braille, easy-to-read formats) and adaptive training methods (e.g., tactile learning, step-by-step guidance).
- For migrants and refugees, offer multilingual resources and culturally sensitive content to overcome language and cultural barriers. Also, people with migration experience should not be viewed exclusively as vulnerable, since individuals with experiences of displacement often possess their own experience in dealing with crisis situations. Stronger integration of these experiences could make an important contribution to the further development of disaster preparedness education.
- When working with older people, short and flexible teaching methods should be used, employing clear language, practical demonstrations and exercises that support memory and mental and physical fitness. As their abilities gradually decline with age, the exercises should also stimulate the senses, memory and attention. Older people learn from their own experiences, which is why it is worth drawing on their wealth of knowledge and years of life experience.

Older people should not be viewed as a homogeneous group or solely through the prism of age-related limitations. They differ in terms of health, fitness, family circumstances, activity levels and skills. At the same time, they possess a wealth of life and professional experience, knowledge of the local community, and practical ways of coping with difficulties, which they can use both for their own safety and to support others.

3. **Improve Awareness and Accessibility**

- Disseminate information through multiple channels, including digital platforms, community networks, and local media, to reach underserved groups.
- Partner with NGOs, senior organizations, and disability advocacy groups to expand outreach and tailor communication.
- Cooperation should be established with local government, the business sector, local leaders, cultural institutions, sports centres, social welfare organisations and the media, in order to utilise resources, participate in networks or improve communication between stakeholders with a view to building social resilience. A lack of adequate communication between organisations working to strengthen resilience is cited as one of the main causes of systemic failure.
- Develop centralized, user-friendly databases of training opportunities, as lack of awareness is a major barrier in all countries.
- Community communication between stakeholders should be encouraged to build local resilience. Through training sessions, ask what is in place, what could be improved, and

what is missing. Provide examples of how to identify resources and risks. Help to identify key needs and challenges.

- Invitation – an invitation to a training session is a particularly important form of communication. Identify the appropriate communication channel for the group taking part in the training, send out the invitation, ask volunteers and stakeholders for support in reaching the target audience, and obtain feedback. In the case of a group of older people, it is worth drawing on the authority of someone they know and reminding them about the training session the day before.

4. Leverage Local and Community-Based Approaches

- Conduct training in neighbourhood centres, community halls, and familiar venues to reduce logistical barriers.
- Involve local leaders, caregivers, and peer networks to build trust and encourage participation.
- Integrate training into existing community activities (e.g., senior clubs, school programs, workplace safety initiatives) to increase engagement.
- Engage local government, local cultural institutions, sports centres, social welfare organisations and the business community. These are organisations that have financial resources at their disposal and help to organise events and activities for the local community. Reaching out to them with the message that social resilience needs to be strengthened will broaden their understanding and enable them to get involved, participate or lend their support. Collaboration with these institutions, within their own settings, can help build resilience following training sessions, take their needs into account and provide feedback from target groups. In line with the principle: “Do not create paths merely for the sake of having them, but so that they may thrive.”
- Identify resources and ask what would need to happen for resilience-building to work more effectively within the local community. The knowledge imparted during the training and the trainer’s approach (e.g. facilitation, discussions with local leaders and institutions) generate added value in the form of ideas, suggestions, recommendations, and the identification of new resources and opportunities which the community can utilise after the training has taken place.

5. Address Psychological and Social Barriers

- Frame training positively, emphasizing empowerment, safety, and community resilience rather than fear or crisis.
- Include psychosocial preparedness (e.g., staying calm, decision-making under stress) as a core component of training.
- Familiarize vulnerable groups with emergency services through meet-and-greet sessions, simulations, and gradual exposure to reduce anxiety and build cooperation.
- During training sessions, ensure there is a positive atmosphere and that participants feel psychologically and physically safe, so that they feel this support from both the group and the trainer. This is particularly important for older people, who often live alone. For this group, simply being in the company of others is a source of motivation. They are more

willing to open up and share their experiences when the atmosphere is friendly and respectful. A social ritual – such as tea, coffee or light refreshments – helps to break the ice with older people.

6. Ensure Financial and Organizational Support

- Offer free or low-cost training to remove financial barriers, particularly for low-income and vulnerable groups.
- Provide logistical support (e.g., transportation, childcare, flexible scheduling) to accommodate diverse needs.
- Train instructors in adaptive teaching methods to ensure they can effectively engage with all target groups.

4. Conclusion

The Analysis Report underscores that disaster preparedness education in Austria, Croatia, Germany, and Poland is at a crossroads. While each country has made progress in legal reforms, public awareness, and community engagement, structural, educational, and operational gaps persist, particularly for vulnerable populations. The mixed-methods approach—combining quantitative surveys and qualitative insights (interviews, focus groups, workshops)—has revealed three overarching challenges that must be addressed to build resilient, inclusive, and effective disaster preparedness systems.

Structural and Organizational Challenges: The Need for Coordination and Reform

The **multi-tiered disaster management systems** in all four countries—while allowing for localized responses—often suffer from fragmentation and poor coordination. In Poland, the 2024 floods exposed weaknesses in inter-agency cooperation, with communication breakdowns forcing decision-makers into "rescue logic" improvisation. Similarly, Croatia's decentralized system, with 17 district headquarters, struggles with personnel shortages (4,000 unfilled commissioner positions) and GDPR-related data-sharing restrictions, hindering efforts to support vulnerable groups. Germany's federal-state tensions further illustrate the difficulties of seamless collaboration across administrative levels.

Volunteers are a cornerstone of disaster response, yet their integration remains underutilized. In Germany, migrants possess valuable skills (e.g., multilingualism, intercultural competencies) but face barriers such as language requirements and formal obligations. Poland's 19115 system and Austria's Team Österreich demonstrate how digital platforms and community networks can mobilize volunteers effectively, but scalability and training remain challenges.

Seniors have a wealth of experience in building resilience and offer great potential as volunteers in their professional fields, with free time at their disposal and a willingness to support one another. They are motivated to combat loneliness. However, upon retirement, their organisational potential diminishes. There is no tradition of setting up senior citizens' clubs within workplaces. Local associations face a shortage of meeting venues in the immediate neighbourhood. It is difficult to locate a lonely senior citizen in the event of rescue or evacuation operations. The challenge remains to expand the self-organising network of senior citizens, providing them with an innovative space for meetings that build resilience, for example through collaboration with the business sector and employee volunteering.

Educational and Inclusivity Gaps: Tailoring Training to Diverse Needs

The current state of disaster preparedness education varies across countries but is uniformly underdeveloped for vulnerable groups. In Poland, respondents rated the system as severely underdeveloped, while in Germany, it is seen as existing but fragmented. Austria and Croatia show moderate but divided perceptions, with NGOs and local governments leading efforts but coordination remaining weak.

Key barriers include:

- Lack of awareness.
- A lack of adequate communication between stakeholders (local government, NGOs, the business sector, residents, experts).
- Inadequate mapping of resources, including insufficient cooperation with the business sector as partners in building community resilience to crises.
- Logistical constraints: Transportation, time, and digital literacy limit access, particularly for older people and people with disabilities.
- Psychological resistance: Aversion to crisis-related topics and mistrust of authorities hinder engagement.
- Inaccessible materials: Screen-reader incompatibility, lack of Braille, and complex language exclude people with disabilities, while monolingual resources marginalize migrants.
- There are not enough venues (available premises) for meetings in the neighbourhood, which is important for groups with reduced mobility, such as older people.

Target-group-specific needs must be prioritized:

- Older people prefer short, flexible sessions (e.g., workshops, demonstrations) tailored to their needs and physical and mental capabilities, with elements of social interaction in their immediate neighbourhood (e.g. senior citizens' clubs, community centres).
- People with disabilities require adaptive formats (e.g., audio materials, tactile learning, step-by-step guidance).
- Migrants need multilingual, culturally sensitive training

Operational and Psychological Readiness: Preparing for Modern Threats

Beyond structural and educational challenges, operational and **psychological preparedness** must be strengthened to address evolving risks. Hybrid threats—such as disinformation, cyberattacks, and cognitive warfare—are increasingly prevalent, as highlighted in Poland and Germany. Psychological support remains insufficient, with limited post-crisis mental health capacity.

Operational challenges include:

- Improvisation in crises: Formal plans often fail due to communication breakdowns.
- Resource mapping gaps: Local authorities lack knowledge of available equipment/personnel, leading to delays in response.
- Lack of trained personnel: Emergency services are often unprepared to assist vulnerable groups (e.g., people with disabilities, migrants).

The report demonstrates that effective disaster preparedness requires a holistic, adaptive, and inclusive approach. While Austria, Croatia, Germany, and Poland have each developed unique strengths cross-cutting challenges demand collective solutions. As climate change, hybrid threats, and societal vulnerabilities continue to evolve, the lessons from this report offer valuable insights for

building a future where preparedness is not just a priority—but a shared responsibility. Disaster preparedness is not just a technical challenge—it is a societal one. By addressing structural gaps, tailoring education to diverse needs, and fostering collaboration, policymakers and practitioners can build resilient systems that empower all members of society to face emergencies with confidence and competence, ensuring that no one is left behind in disaster preparedness efforts.