Empower citizens as the backbone of societal resilience and preparedness

Safer Together

Strengthening Europe's Civilian and Military Preparedness and Readiness by Sauli Niinistö

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Building block #4

What is the challenge?

- The EU and Member States can best protect citizens by increasing citizens' risk awareness, encouraging self-reliance, and enabling citizens – in different capacities – to play an active role in ensuring crisis preparedness and first response.
- Citizens with a clear and nuanced understanding of likely risks are more capable of making riskinformed decisions and implementing individual security measures.
- This includes citizens' roles in different capacities to help protect and defend their country and therefore the EU in the event of an armed aggression. It also means encouraging their engagement in taking necessary action to tackle and prepare for the consequences of climate change.

"Ultimately, citizens' awareness, ability, and readiness to act to respond to a disaster or adversity are the bedrock of the EU's preparedness."

- Within the Union, different regions are exposed to climate extremes or geopolitical tensions to varying degrees. It is important to be aware of how interdependencies within the EU can impact all Member States, regions and citizens.
- We have seen how protracted crises like the COVID-19 pandemic impact the mental wellbeing of citizens, as the prevalence of anxiety and depression rose significantly in many EU Member States.
- Malicious and hostile actors use dis- and misinformation to actively influence the views of citizens and undermine the integrity and functioning of our democratic governance.
 Especially in sudden crisis situations, it is important that citizens trust their government and the assessments it makes to take action in their interest.
- Whether facing extreme weather, a pandemic, a large-scale power outage, the impacts of a major cyberattack, or even armed aggression, citizens need to have a high degree of self-sufficiency in the first instance until assistance is mobilised or services are restored. Currently, levels of household preparedness across the EU are very different. Also, urban and rural environments present very different crisis preparedness challenges.

More than half of EU citizens do not feel well prepared for disasters (58%) and just under half would know what to do in the event of a disaster (46%).

- Crises hit some people and places harder than others, often exacerbating pre-existing vulnerabilities and inequalities. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic had a disproportionate impact on the elderly, women, low-income communities, and racial and ethnic minorities. Moreover, it accelerated depopulation trends and demographic shifts in certain regions. Member States' armed forces, civil protection and emergency services, law enforcement, as well as professional domains key to resilience. including cybersecurity, are confronted with growing recruitment challenges or shortfalls. This also applies to the private sector, including the defence and aerospace industry, and critical infrastructure operators.
- In a major crisis, such as another pandemic, but especially also in a context of armed aggression, a lack of skilled workforce due to mobilisation, conscription, or free movement restrictions would pose a significant challenge to the EU's industrial, economic and societal resilience.
- Civil protection and emergency services in many EU Member States draw routinely upon volunteers.
 Immediate first response to many disasters is through local community-based action.

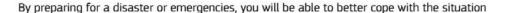
To address existing shortfalls and to continue to engage citizens in active volunteering from a young age, volunteer organisations require resources, with support from the EU on risk awareness and training opportunities.

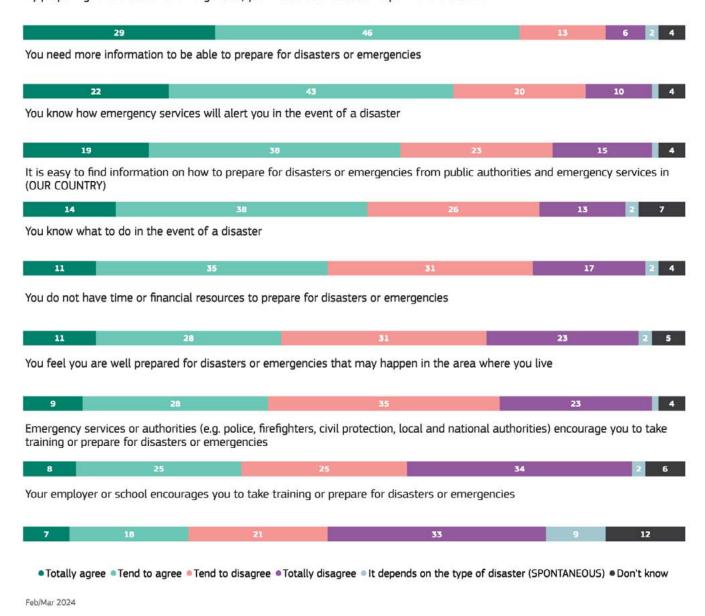
What is the objective?

- Raise household preparedness to ensure that every EU citizen is equipped to provide for themselves.
- Support Member States to increase the overall level of risk awareness and to enhance the culture of preparedness amongst the population, as part of preparEU flagship initiative.
- Bolster citizens' ability to recognise authoritative sources of crisis response information and to dismiss disinformation and Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI).
- Better protecting and engaging with people with specific vulnerabilities and bringing focus to regions at risk of being left behind should be a core dimension of building societal resilience.

Across the EU, more than one in three citizens (37%) have personally experienced a disaster – other than COVID-19 – in the last ten years.

QC8. Now we will discuss a few statements about your personal preparedness in the event of a disaster or emergency... Please tell me to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the following statements. (EU27) (%)





Special Eurobarometer 547 - Disaster risk awareness and preparedness of the EU population, 2024.

What does the Report propose?

Enhance individual and household preparedness:

√ Jointly invest in citizens' risk education, incorporating different dimensions, such as cybersecurity, disaster risks, and disinformation. The gradual integration of crisis preparedness and risk awareness, as well as media and digital literacy, into education programmes and curricula across the EU could be an additional option to ensure structural investment in societal resilience

- √ Promote a target of 72-hour self-sufficiency through coordinated information campaigns, building upon ongoing work in the context of 'PreparEU', , regardless of the emergency, (e.g. by providing common or coordinated guidelines on stockpiling, evacuations, CBRN situations, access to medical services or schooling in emergencies, etc.).
- √ Involve civil society organisations, trade unions and employers to enhance preparedness in different walks of life

Improve crisis and emergency communication to reach citizens under all conditions.

√ Member States' crisis communication or alert apps and other back-up early warning systems should be regularly tested and surveyed for gaps and for interoperability. Lessons learned on the use of these systems during the COVID-19 pandemic in Member States and during other major recent disasters, notably sudden onset extreme weather events, should be analysed to guide further efforts.

Prepare to better tackle vulnerability to crises and disasters:

- √ Further invest in disaster risk management for people disproportionately affected by disasters and other crisis situations, ensuring inclusive disaster preparedness at community level, paying extra attention to reducing the vulnerability to disasters of certain groups, such as the elderly, people with disabilities, people with chronic diseases, and children and pregnant women.
- √ Prepare in advance to minimise the disruption of protracted crises on social cohesion and the socioeconomic fabric of our societies.

Address the skills gap and risk of labour shortages during crises and promote active citizenship:

- ✓ Implement forward-looking measures, such as mapping workforce needs, training new labour force segments, facilitating skilled worker inflow, or putting in place labour mobility mechanisms. With its Internal Market Emergency and Resilience Act (IMERA), the EU already has a concrete tool at its disposal to facilitate the free movement of workers and service providers in crisis situations. Further steps may be needed to address skills gaps and the risk of shortages in sectors critical to crisis preparedness.
- ✓ Develop targeted incentives to increase the appeal of careers in defence, security and emergency response among younger generations, working together with trade unions and employers' organisations. Possible actions could be introduced as part of the Quality Jobs Roadmap announced in the Political Guidelines (2024-2029). Structured exchanges among Member States could help to identify best practices in relation to national service and conscription models, education programmes, the build-up of functioning reserve systems, etc. that can serve as inspiration to others, are potentially transferable, and can be further facilitated at the EU level.
- √ Reinforce channels and opportunities enabling the active participation of young people in preparedness
 action by stepping up support for the voluntary sector. Explore additional opportunities to volunteer for
 crisis preparedness through existing EU programmes, such as the European Solidarity Corps, and step up
 dedicated engagement with established youth movementson crisis preparedness.