



PrepAGE
Enhancing disaster management preparedness
for the older population in the EU

National Workshop - Report

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1. Introduction

In disaster situations there are groups of older people who are identified as high risk, for example those who are isolated or have chronic illness or mobility impairment.

The specific needs of these groups of people increase their vulnerability during a disaster, for example in times of extreme weather, flooding, or power outages.

The aim of the PrepAGE project is to raise awareness of the special requirements of older people in disasters and use this information in disaster preparedness and prevention programmes. Both caregiving organisations, organisations dealing with disaster preparedness, and the respective authorities should be involved in this process. The project will also take into account the resources and resilience of older people.

The national workshop in Vienna on March 16, 2015 brought together experts from the health and social sector, the field of disaster management, and representatives of Austrian Government agencies. The aim of the workshop was to present the results of the desk research and the empirical research conducted in the first phase of the project, and to discuss and analyse the current situation of older people in disaster situations and their needs and challenges with the participating experts. This was the basis for formulating recommendations at the national level.

2. Participants of the National Workshop

- 1) **Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection:** Department for Care, Disability and Social Support
- 2) **Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection:** Department for Seniors' Affairs
- 3) **Federal Ministry of Health:** Department for Public Health and Medical Affairs
- 4) **Federal Ministry of the Interior** (excused)
- 5) **Johanniter** (NGO providing ambulance services and care services)
- 6) **Lower Austrian Civil Protection Association**
- 7) **Pensionistenverband** (Seniors' organisation of the Social Democratic party)
- 8) **University of Innsbruck**
- 9) **Austrian Red Cross, Volunteer ambulance services Innsbruck**
- 10) **Austrian Red Cross Headquarters**

3. Experience of the various organisations and decision makers in Austria with older population in disaster situations

After the welcome by Monika Wild, Head of the Health and Social Services Department of the Austrian Red Cross and introductions, the scientific partner, the University of Innsbruck introduced the research results. Six hundred scientific articles and guidelines were identified in the desk research and seventy five of the most relevant were analysed in detail to define the





needs and challenges of older people in emergencies. For the empirical research twenty experts from fourteen different National Red Cross Societies took part in an online survey.

The following questions were discussed by the participating experts:

1) How do you see the results? What was new / surprising for you? What was missing? Do you have any further questions?

- An important issue that was identified was the cooperation of the different organisations. It was mentioned that in some cases communication between the organisations is difficult in disaster situations.
- While there is definitely a proclivity for some older people to fear and refuse evacuation, it was mentioned that this can be a problem for people of any age.
- One of the difficulties highlighted was the fact that no one is aware of how many older people there are that are especially vulnerable in disasters and who need special support. It was mentioned that there are no lists in the communities, and a database could be useful. It was discussed that in some countries there are registers of vulnerable people e.g. in the United Kingdom. If this was to happen, the register would need to be constantly updated and it would be necessary to identify who would have access to the register.

The following solutions were discussed:

- To include the vulnerability of a person in potential disaster situations in the register of care allowance recipients:
 - One issue that might be difficult is data protection. Legal regulations would have to be changed to access the data of care allowance recipients in such a way. Also, not everyone who receives care allowance is especially vulnerable in the event of a disaster, so there would have to be additional information on the vulnerability of the person.
 - The agreement of the patients would be necessary.
- It was also discussed that such a register could be linked to the electronic health record (ELGA) that is being implemented in Austria. This is seen as a difficult option, since the e-card would be necessary to access data. Using ELGA for these purposes is seen to be more difficult than using the register of care allowance recipients.

What was new:

- In the experience of the Lower Austrian Civil Protection Organisation many of the issues identified in the research for older people also apply to people of all ages (such as fear of evacuation or lack of personal preparedness).





- Participants were surprised that the issue of older people in disasters is not mentioned in Austrian legislation.
- It was discussed that the main focus of looking at older people in disasters should not be on age, but on socially disadvantaged and vulnerable people.
- Resources and strengths of older people should be a focus in disaster preparedness and in other phases of disaster management.

What was missing?

- It was mentioned that it is important to consider personal responsibility for disaster preparedness. Awareness should be raised among older people so that they can be responsible for themselves in disaster situations. Self-preparedness is an important issue.
- In poorly resourced countries awareness of self-protection is much higher, because they have had experience with disasters and know that it can take some time until responders can offer their support.
- Preparing oneself is much easier:
 - In certain communities that are more prone to disasters and therefore have more experience.
 - In disasters that are foreseeable to a certain extent.
- Less endangered communities, e.g. big cities, have less social networks and resources and therefore less awareness about preparedness.
- Structures must be created for data exchange in the different organisations. Certain organisations have data on vulnerable groups (e.g. tele-alarm services), and these could be accessed by responders if the cooperation of the organisations was already established in advance.
- In the event of a disaster local communities are more able to judge who needs additional support.
- Where is the borderline between awareness- raising and creating panic among the population? An important issue for preparedness and media information is to raise awareness among the population without causing unwarranted panic.
- Door-knocking-campaigns in cities could be useful in the event of a disaster.

2) Do you face these issues in your work? If yes in which context? If no what do you think is the cause?

- These issues are part of the Austrian Civil Protection Organisations' daily work. Information given to the general public does not usually lead to additional panic but rather offers reassurance, as the population then knows how to behave in a disaster situation.





- Many older volunteers are active in the Austrian Civil Protection Organisation. However there are no special offers for older people. Barrier-free structures in disaster preparedness and response are currently being discussed within the organisation.
- In the field of care, the context of older people and disasters has not been a relevant topic until now.
- Needs assessments should be conducted, raising questions such as: Which disasters could affect me? Which structures are available in the communities? What are the specific challenges facing hospitals, nursery schools etc.?
- Awareness- raising must take place between the stakeholders of the communities. Each community is different, therefore general recommendations are difficult.
- The organisations in each community must be known and the communication amongst them should be promoted, e.g. with mapping exercises. Networking between the organisations is an important issue in determining who acts and how they act in disaster situations.
- The Austrian Civil Protection Association cooperates with the communities checking which resources are in the community, and whether there is a need for more support.

3) Is the topic “Older people in disasters” an issue for the future?

- One challenge is that the percentage of people in need of care is increasing and that catering for vulnerabilities in disasters is becoming more important (e. g. people with dementia).
- One issue that was raised is that hospitals and residential institutions do not stock as much of their care aids and medical supplies as they used to, since many things can now be ordered on demand. In the event of a disaster this can be a problem (or example, in Fukushima the hospitals were not prepared).
- Preparing oneself: It is important that (older) people prepare themselves and have lists of important telephone numbers, medications they need or their documents ready in case of a disaster. It was mentioned that lists of medication necessary for an individual are registered in the electronic health record (ELGA).
- There should be more of a focus on organising the cooperation of organisations at a local level. There should be a crisis management group, where different organisations work together, (including at a preparedness level), so that everybody knows which organisations are responsible for what.
- There should be networking for the staff both in the field of care and in emergency response in the communities 1-2 times each year as awareness raising for stakeholders is important.
- An important question raised was about how to deal with big disasters, when sustainable resources are damaged, and how logistics would be managed during such an event.





- For example, during power outages (when elevators and telephones do not work); it is important to have a plan for families regarding how they can communicate, what to do in a disaster situation, where can they meet etc.

4) Do you see additional specific needs of older people in emergencies? Which groups are particularly vulnerable/ in danger?

- Those people who experience language barriers who are older, or people who have a hearing impairment
 - It was suggested that information should be available that does not use language (e.g, graphics, pantomime).
- Families with children and elderly who care for others are in need of support
- People with dementia who are mobile
- Older disabled persons
- People with chronic illness, palliative patients who are dependent on machines (e.g. respirator, dialysis etc. would need a plan on how to evacuate)
- People with a mobility impairment would also require a plan, e.g. if the elevator does not work

5) Where do you see the strengths/resources of older people in disaster situation?

- Elderly volunteers are active in the Austrian Civil Protection Organisation. The organisation offers training and runs information events. Retired persons are also seen as having time and energy, e.g. for helping neighbours or other volunteer activities in connection with preparedness.
- Older people might have more resistance to certain types of disasters due to previous experience, such as power outages.
- Older people are good communicators in crisis situations and can be good broadcasters of knowledge.
- In general older people are quite active as volunteers. In some organisations, there are age limits for certain roles, which might hinder their engagement.





4. Recommendations

- **Accessibility:** In the preparedness phase, the issue of how to get in contact with older, vulnerable people is important:
 - Establishment of a database.
 - Voluntary register: linked to care allowance (text in the form: “Agreement for the use of the data in the event of an emergency”).
 - In local emergency management plans, organisations (in the field of care and rescue) should network and cooperate in communities, and the authorities should also be involved.
- **Training** of the staff
- **Awareness- raising** at all levels (nursing staff, people in the community etc.)
- **Information**
 - Alert systems for deaf people and information without speech (icons, videos)
 - Simple information (barrier free / speech comprehension), available to all of Austria.
- **Peer groups**, door-knocking,
 - Involve media: media campaign – contact advisory board of ORF (Austrian Broadcasting Corporation); Access the necessary information through the Austrian Civil Protection Association.
 - Use association structures in the communities; local associations as multipliers (even music clubs, sport clubs, retired persons clubs etc.).
 - Strengthen neighbourhood networks (awareness- raising: “who is my neighbour”).
- **Annual exercises in the communities**
 - Involve older people, even in emergency plans.
 - Involve nursing staff.

