



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

Recommendations

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1. Introduction

The PrepAGE project, a European project co-financed by the European Commission, aims to enhance disaster preparedness, response and recovery with respect to older people. The project focused on exploring how the needs of vulnerable older people (e.g. those with mobility impairments or care needs) can be met within an emergency situation and how older people themselves can be enabled as a resource in an emergency, able to support each other and people of all age groups, throughout all stages of the disaster management cycle. One of the PrepAGE project's main activities was to develop recommendations at a national and European level on how best to incorporate the needs and strengths of older people into emergency planning and response.

In the first stage of the project, desk research was carried out to identify studies, guidelines and recommendations on older people in disasters. Following this, an empirical study asked experts from across Europe about their organisations' experiences, awareness and preparedness on dealing with the special requirements of older people in disasters. Based on these results, national workshops were held in Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Latvia and the United Kingdom, followed by a European workshop, where experts were invited to input into the research findings through focus group discussions.

At the national workshops, experts in the fields of health and social care and disaster management participated as well as representatives from ministries, civil protection authorities, social care institutions and not-for-profit organisations. The national workshops had between 15 and 45 participants, amounting to 130 expert participants across all partner countries. The discussions on the status quo in each country and national recommendations were recorded in individual reports which are available at www.prepage-project.eu.

After the national workshops, a European workshop with representatives from Red Cross National Society partners, national authorities and service providers was held on 1st and 2nd June, 2015 in Bulgaria. Research results were presented, national results were compared and a set of European recommendations were formulated that are relevant to all participating countries.

The recommendations have been summarised and incorporated into five key themes and are described in detail below:

- Improving cooperation and coordination among stakeholders
- Developing robust and updated databases to ensure that vulnerable older people can be reached in the case of emergency (at the local level)
- Raising awareness and providing information
- Encouraging community involvement
- Offering psychosocial support focusing on the needs of older people

2. Improving cooperation and coordination among stakeholders

The system of protection and rescue within the European Union is based on the principle of subsidiarity. It is of great importance to encourage cooperation and coordination between stakeholders, starting with local municipalities and regional governments, up to the national level in each country, as well as at the European Union level among the Member States. In crisis situations, especially large-scale emergencies, the engagement of all emergency and rescue services is often required. Cooperation and coordination between organisations and authorities, as well as activities conducted within each of the three phases of the disaster management cycle, is important. Experience has shown that cooperation and coordination among the agencies gives better results in terms of providing assistance to the affected population and returning vital infrastructure to a state that allows the community to function again. With respect to the needs of vulnerable older people, the cooperation of additional organisations that are not normally part of the response capability, such as health and social care providers or advocacy organisations for older people, may be required. All countries identified a lack of contact, knowledge and understanding between emergency organisations and those responsible for caring for and supporting older people.

Recommendations have been formulated to address three main points:

2.1. Improvements in coordination

- In general, the connection and coordination between stakeholders from the protection and rescue field and those from the health and social care sector requires improvement.
- Roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder should be defined at an early stage to increase awareness and understanding between protection and rescue organisations and those in the field of care and advocacy for older people. Organisational charts with clear roles and responsibilities should be developed at a local level.
- Roles, responsibilities, and crosscutting issues that require cooperation with respect to vulnerable older people should be actively communicated between stakeholders.
- Organisational awareness in the fields of disaster management and health and social care for older people should be improved through joint training, networking activities and workshops.
- In situations of large-scale disasters, there are no administrative borders between countries. It is necessary therefore to promote bilateral and

multilateral cooperation between the protection and rescue organisations and regional authorities in order to be better prepared and better equipped to deal with the consequences of a disaster. Specific issues concerning vulnerable older people should be addressed as one topic between organisations cooperating across borders.

- Lead agencies should ensure that all stakeholders are aware of the disaster management cycle and clarify which stakeholders have responsibility for specific phases according to local legislation.

Disaster Management Cycle



Graphics: Winston-Salem State University;
<https://wssu.edu/administration/campus-police/emergency-management/default.aspx>

Good example for cooperation on the local level:

There are 42 Local Resilience Forums located in **England and Wales** which have a joint budget and also exercise together. The website of the Local Resilience Forums summarises them as:

“The local resilience forums in the UK (LRFs) are multi-agency partnerships made up of representatives from local public services, including the emergency services, local authorities, the NHS, the Environment Agency and others. These agencies are known as Category 1 Responders, as defined by the Civil Contingencies Act. LRFs are supported by organisations, known as Category 2 responders, such as the Highways Agency and public utility companies. They have a responsibility to co-operate with Category 1 organisations and to share relevant information with the LRF. The geographical area the forums cover is based on police areas. LRFs also work with other partners in the military and voluntary sectors who provide a valuable contribution to LRF work in emergency preparedness. The LRFs aims to plan and prepare for localised incidents and catastrophic emergencies. They work to identify potential risks and produce emergency plans to either prevent or mitigate the impact of any incident on their local communities.”

<https://www.gov.uk/local-resilience-forums-contact-details>

2.2. Exercising together

The most effective way to improve cooperation between stakeholders, with respect to older people in emergencies, as well as raise awareness among the population, is through regular joint exercises. While there are some good examples for this on a general, disaster management level, specific exercises which include older people explicitly are rare.

- It is recommended that regular exercises involving all stakeholders are carried out in order to develop, adapt and test local emergency plans that consider the needs of vulnerable older people.
- These should be multi-agency exercises that include all responders, services, local government, community groups as well as vulnerable and active older people.
- One main aim of these exercises should be to practically test individual and organisational roles and responsibilities in a disaster situation and to check organisational procedures that have been agreed in advance.
- Exercises should be carried out regularly (at least annually), so all of those involved stay familiar with procedures. They should take place on a local level and involve small groups and community networks. The local population should be included rather than role play scenarios using actors.

Good examples for involving local representatives in disaster preparedness

Austria: In the City of Innsbruck all responders conduct table top exercises two or three times a year together with the municipal authorities. In January 2016, this exercise focussed on considering the needs of vulnerable older people living at home in the context of a power outage scenario in the framework of the PrepAGE project.

Italy: In Sicily which is at high risk of earthquakes, there are very good examples of regular table-top exercises for an earthquake scenario involving all key stakeholders.

3. Developing robust and updated databases to ensure that vulnerable older people can be reached in case of disaster (at the local level)

In many countries there is little to no information available on where vulnerable older people live and those organisations that do hold this information, are not always in contact with emergency responders. The challenges in accessing older vulnerable people in the case of a disaster were addressed in all countries and the following is recommended:

- Creation of an electronic database of vulnerable older people that is regularly updated and shared between stakeholders in order to be able to accurately identify the target group at a local level (including micro level such as a block of flats or neighbourhoods).
- Ideally, the database should be available on a national level, but must include the ability to analyse and use the data for local or defined regions.
- Development of a procedure on how to generate the data for compliance with legal regulations or adaptation of legal regulations accordingly.
- The database must be structured in a way that provides important information about all vulnerable people that have special requirements in the case of a disaster.
- A table should be constructed detailing who the target groups are according to need. Groups should be prioritised according to vulnerability.
- Information on the following issues should be collected: health status, chronic illnesses, medication and other medical needs, social care needs and provision, dietary needs, mobility and emergency contacts.
- Information sharing must be in compliance with legal regulations and only the necessary information should be shared.
- An organisation at the local and/or national level should be nominated to lead coordination activities in terms of the database. In some European countries implementation could be most effective if the responsibility and management is left to national or local governments (ministries, municipalities, cities), in others, organisations like the Red Cross could be more effective in dealing with this task due to the fact that they are often responsible for both the care of older people and disaster management.

- Development of a guide or a memorandum of understanding on how to access and exchange information between organisations, before, during and after crises or disasters. This should also ensure that information in the database is entered by a reliable source and shared in an appropriate and proper way. It should also define who has access to the database and how the information can be used.
- Databases alone are not enough to ensure that the needs of vulnerable older people are considered in all phases of disaster management. Personal preparedness of older people and their families/caregivers as well as strengthening neighbourhood networks is very important, including awareness raising and providing accurate and accessible information (see points 4. and 5.).

4. Raising Awareness and providing information

In all participating countries, a lack of awareness about disaster preparedness among the population as a whole –older people included– was identified. Effort needs to be made to improve (older) individuals' preparedness for disasters and that these individuals also need to be made aware of how they can help themselves, and their peers, in an emergency. It is not enough to rely on institutional solutions (such as vulnerability lists or the expectation that responders will be available at all times). Fear of evacuation or lack of knowledge about procedures in case of disasters was seen as being especially pertinent among older people.

4.1. Raising awareness

- It is necessary to encourage the entire community to get more involved with activities in the preparedness phase of the disaster management cycle, in order to increase overall resilience in the response phase and to achieve more effective results in the recovery phase.
- All members of the population should be encouraged to create action and household emergency plans, starting with the family, through small communities and to large cities and regions. This should include an emergency kit. Questions to include in the action plan could be: What can I do to increase the resilience of my family and community in case of emergency situations and disasters? Special focus should be placed on older people and their families.
- Activities should be run to inform older people and their families of procedures in disaster situations, to familiarise them with emergency shelters and to reduce fear of evacuation.
- Educational and preventive activities such as information campaigns should be created for three distinct target groups:
 - o organisations that are professionally dealing with activities related to the protection and rescue challenges or health and social care for older people
 - o the local community – with a focus on older people and their friends and family
 - o local government.
- Procedures, exercises and workshops should be developed to encourage the local population to participate in activities that lead to better preparedness and effective response to disasters.

4.2. Encouraging local governments and local authorities to fulfil their legal role

In all of the partner countries, local governments have a legally binding role in coordinating disaster response. However, due to factors such as the rapidly changing political environment, sometimes other pressing issues are given higher priority. This has led to a lack of specific training; representatives such as mayors cannot always fulfil these roles. With respect to older people in disasters the following recommendations are made:

- Provide campaigns and training for local government representatives, including local mayors in all activities, e.g. database as well as joint exercises (see Recommendation 2.2. and 3.).
- Raise awareness among local authorities that it is their responsibility (in most cases it is their legal obligation) to coordinate all actors in their community. Encourage local authorities to take the lead in the coordination of emergencies, prepare them through meetings and training events.
- Specifically, emergency training sessions for local authorities should be offered with a focus on vulnerable (older) people together with other organisations.
- Joint exercises should be conducted with local authorities, e.g. table-top exercise with local authorities involved (see Recommendation 2.2)

Good examples involving local representatives in disaster preparedness

Austria: The Lower Austrian Civil Protection Organisation trains mayors with respect to local disaster plans regarding real risks. These plans also consider the recovery phase. 200 such training sessions are carried out in Lower Austria per year.

Croatia: In a town with regular flooding, many older people did not feel the need to be evacuated during the day, but at night they started to become anxious and numerous people called the emergency services at night and asked to be evacuated. The services advised the mayor that a publicity campaign should be launched to inform residents that everyone would benefit from conducting the evacuation in the daytime. The mayor accepted the advice and informed the radio stations and thus a publicity campaign was started. This improved the situation substantially.

4.3. Ensuring accurate and adequate information to the (vulnerable) older population and other stakeholders

The use of appropriate language and the types of media used to communicate with the (vulnerable) older population is important. In the national workshops it was established that often the language and media used to communicate disaster preparedness and procedural issues were not adequate for the vulnerable older population. Some older people do not use social media or the internet in general. Also, hearing and visual impairments need to be taken into account. The following recommendations should be considered with respect to information material and communication campaigns:

- Ensure that accurate information is delivered to everyone to empower him/her to prepare for a disaster and ensure that information is given appropriately.
- Use appropriate and positive language in communication to older people.
- Information must be accessible to the target group so the use of radio and television as well as telephoning and door knocking rather than emails, SMS, social media or WhatsApp is preferential.
- Develop materials and use terminology which will be understood by the general population, people with disabilities and the media.
- Use appropriate and positive language in communications with older people and provide clear and accurate information that will not spread panic, but will contribute to a better understanding of the procedures and activities before, during and after disasters.
- Use accessible language, pictures, symbols and photos to cater to those who do not speak local languages or who have problems reading due to visual impairments.
- Provide leaflets using images explaining what actions to take, before, during and after a disaster.

Good examples for communication

Haiti, Japan: There are some good examples of how mobile telephone providers worked together with responders to send warning texts to large portions of the population in recent disasters.

UK: The Alzheimer's Society produces a free guide 'The memory handbook: a practical guide to living with memory problems'. The guide contains a wealth of information and suggests creating permanent signs around the home, for example a laminated A4 sheet, as a reminder to do recurring tasks for example a sign to the inside of the front door to remind you to take your keys, purse, wallet or a shopping list with you.

5. Encouraging community involvement

The principle of subsidiarity applies to all professional services with responsibility for emergency response and ensuring the safety of communities. Based on the experience of many organisations, it has been shown that assistance provided in an emergency is more effective if the providers are peers or people known by beneficiaries. In large-scale disaster situations, professional teams for protection and rescue cannot meet all the needs of the affected population. In general it is important to encourage the participation of older volunteers, to improve peer support and the self-help capability of communities. The recommendations are:

- Educate and train volunteers who can offer support to their peers and others in case of an emergency. Older people should be encouraged to volunteer and barriers eliminated, such as age limitations for volunteers in certain fields.
- Raise awareness among the local population of the importance of their active involvement and participation in the protection and rescue system and to encourage networking with neighbours in order to build up a better picture of the situation at the micro level (Who is my neighbour? Whether she/he needs help. Who should I call for help?). Active older people should be trained specifically to support their vulnerable peers.
- Community involvement should also include peer support and training in general. Recommendations should be developed on how to recruit and work together with convergent volunteers and how to encourage older people to participate in such programmes.
- Education for community groups should be provided on disaster preparedness and response with a focus on older people in the form of training for trainers, so that they can pass on this knowledge to the general population.
- Differences in urban and rural situations should be considered with respect to community involvement.

Good example for peer support

Bulgaria: A practical guide for trainers was developed, which provides information on how to prepare for disasters and how to react appropriately. This guide was distributed in 12 regions in Bulgaria. Also a training session for trainers was provided in July 2013 (regional staff members, responsible for the Disaster Preparedness in the BRC Local Branches) on how to specifically train older people. These trained trainers provided 12 regional trainings to 300 older volunteers (25 per region). Some of the trained volunteers and the trained BRC staff then disseminated information among the older population on how to prepare for disasters. These activities took place in pensioners clubs and other regional NGOs (Plovdiv, Yambol, Montana, Shumen, Lovech).

6. Offering psychosocial support/help geared towards the needs of older people

Leaving home because of an emergency can cause great stress for all. However, such situations can cause even more distress among the older population. One aspect is the emotional attachment to objects with sentimental value. The experience of many experts from previous disaster response situations is that psychosocial support and assistance has not been adequately provided to people in need. It is very important to encourage all institutions and organisations to pay more attention to psychosocial assistance/support in order to help people in need. A special focus should be put on supporting vulnerable older people who might be more sensitive to sudden changes than others. Recommendations on the psychosocial support of older people are:

- Provide specific psychosocial support for vulnerable older people in case of evacuation and shelters. Active older people should be trained as peers to support those who are in need of such support.
- A special focus should be put on isolated and lonely older people who might have lost touch with their caregiver or main contact person.
- Emphasis should be put on peer support or other support of responders who work with especially vulnerable people or who have experienced severe situations.
- Continuous training for all those involved in the psychosocial support of vulnerable older people should be offered.

Good example for psychosocial support

In **Croatia** it has been observed that a few days after a disaster, responders and beneficiaries become restless and angry and that psychosocial support in this phase is especially important. The importance of providing support to responders was also recognised.

The aim of the PrepAGE-project which was co-funded by the European Commission's DG ECHO was to introduce specific recommendations for older people in emergency and disaster preparedness and prevention programmes. The PrepAGE-project identified the needs, structures and measures to find out how to prepare and reach the target group of older people in case of emergencies and disasters. The project also took into account the resources and resilience of older people and brought together experts from the health and social sector and the field of disaster management. The project was implemented in Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Latvia and the United Kingdom from 1 April 2014 to 31 May 2016.

For more information see: www.prepage.eu



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