Towards a strengthened societal resilience: ENGAGE at a glance

Improving interactions between citizens and formal actors in a crisis

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This brief summarizes the main results of the Research and Innovation project ENGAGE (2020-2023).[1] It aims at inspiring authorities and emergency organizations on how to strengthen their cooperation with the population in order to prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters. The brief illustrates how recommendations developed by ENGAGE can be supported by solutions developed around the world.

Why does societal resilience matter?

Societal resilience refers to the ability of a society to withstand and recover from various shocks and crises while maintaining essential functions and cohesion. It encompasses the capacity of individuals, communities, formal actors and authorities to anticipate, absorb, adapt to, and recover from disruptive events, whether they are natural disasters, pandemics, or other emergencies. Recent years show vividly the increase in the frequency of, or extent of areas affected by disasters such as fires and floods related in part to climate change. Several other factors, such as globalisation, demographic shifts and geopolitical tensions, also suggest the potential for increased frequency or severity of crises in the future. In this context, the traditional actors of disaster management, authorities and emergency organizations, might not have the resources to manage risks and events by themselves, and need to better leverage the contributions of the population. This is why building societal resilience is so important. It is about mitigating risks and building capacity to respond to and recover from crises more effectively.

Photo Frantz Bouton, Nice Matin

Several examples show that, when a disaster strikes, members of the population provide resources and information that contribute in critical ways to the response to and recovery from the event. However, their involvement nonetheless introduces new risks and uncertainties in an already complex situation. Understanding these dynamics and promoting solutions to these challenges is key in order to leverage a largely untapped potential and achieve a vision of resilience based on society as a whole.

What does ENGAGE provide?

Through case studies, validation exercises and cooperation with a Community of Practice involving practitioners (e.g., first responders, authorities, and members of civil society organizations), ENGAGE has succeeded in building knowledge about societal resilience. This effort included better understanding the contributions of the population in past events, the perception of these contributions and the requirements for their success. This knowledge has influenced the development of policy briefs and recommendations, as well as the creation of a Catalogue of Solutions.

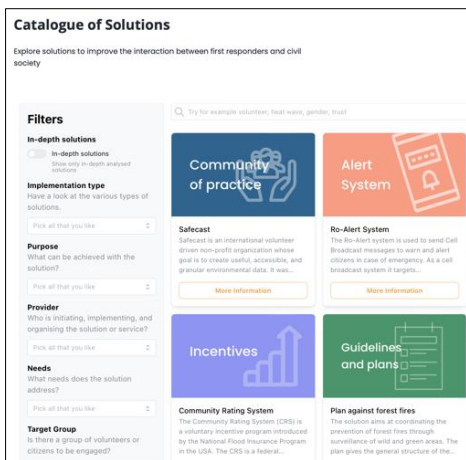ENGAGE provides a set of four policy briefs and recommendations:

» Policy brief: Communicating with Citizens in a Crisis[2]

» Policy brief: The Involvement of Spontaneous Volunteers in Disaster Management[3]

» Recommendations: Public Warning[4]

» Recommendations: Takeaways for First Responders[5]

Further, together with eight Research and Innovation projects part of the EUROPEAN Societal Resilience Cluster, ENGAGE contributed to another comprehensive policy brief:

» Improving Engagement and Communication among Citizens and Authorities.[6]
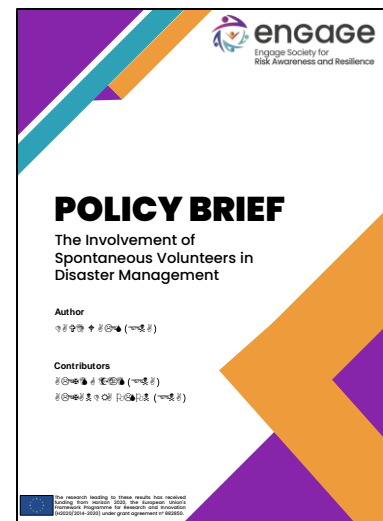
A main focus in ENGAGE was to investigate how the interactions between formal and informal actors in disaster management can be improved. We present solutions, such as guidelines, plans or technologies, that can improve these interactions with the aim to make them known and usable by authorities and emergency organizations. The ENGAGE catalogue of solutions, publicly available[7], covers more than 100 solutions used successfully around the world. Solutions are classified allowing filtering to easily search for solutions. For example, solutions may address particular needs (e.g., improve preparedness) and target different population groups (e.g., children). The implementation of solutions that have proven to work well in one context is likely to require adaptation to local conditions when applied in a new context. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, similar measures were met with varying success across the world, due to differences in various factors such as trust in authorities. ENGAGE has identified important factors that influence the success of the implementation and use of solutions. The impact of these factors is exemplified for a number of solutions.

Some illustrative solutions

The following solutions exemplify how the ENGAGE recommendations for improving communication and engagement can be supported. The intention is not to promote specific solutions, but rather to increase the awareness of the variety of existing solutions used towards building societal resilience.

Communicating to the population

Design consistent messaging and communication that is inclusive and adaptable to specific needs.

Get Ready is a website from the New Zealand Emergencies Management Agency that provides information on different types of hazards as well as advice on how to prepare for an emergency and to encounter them. Guidance about how to identify risks and to create own emergency plans is given for different areas of life, such at work, at school and at home. Information is designed in a simple and appealing way with pictures and videos that make the site attractive to children. The site also targets disabled people, and web pages can be downloaded in an audio format and in braille.

Recognise that communication is a continuous activity that is reliant on creating the right conditions for it to be effective.

30days30ways is the UK's national campaign for community preparedness activities using social media. Over 30 days, messages and resources on all hazards will be shared across social media channels by a wide range of partners, using memes and storytelling to connect and facilitate understanding of risks, empower personal preparedness, inform recovery and resilience. Communication is conducted over a long period of time increasing awareness.

School training campaigns aim to educate children and adolescents on safety measures and how to handle crisis situations. Various institutions are invited to teach about their field of expertise. For instance, NGOs teach students how to perform CPR, while the police focus on road safety measures and the dangers of the internet. The aim of the campaigns is to promote the values of responsibility, privacy, empathy and dignity.

Be Ready Caravan is a mobile training centre built on the structure of a truck. The purpose of the caravan is to raise awareness of what to do in the event of an emergency, in Romania specifically an earthquake. This is done by organising events throughout the country where the caravan is used to provide information and teach basic first aid skills. The caravan is also equipped with medical and first aid equipment and portable devices, including simulators. In addition to visiting cities and different parts of the country as part of its annual calendar, the caravan is also sent to mass events such as concerts, festivals or out to sea during the summer season.

Establish relationships with population representatives to facilitate the participation of diverse groups in preparedness events and activities.

Community opinion leaders leverages the influence of opinion leaders to disseminate information, thereby guiding public opinion. An opinion leader is a respected figure within a group, and shares details and insights to less active members of that group. They are highly trusted and have a significant influence on the collective opinion of the group. During the COVID-19 pandemic, regional health organisations disseminated pandemic-related information through various religious and cultural opinion leaders. The selection of opinion leaders is crucial to ensure that they are credible and have the support of their communities.

Involving the population in Disaster Risk Management
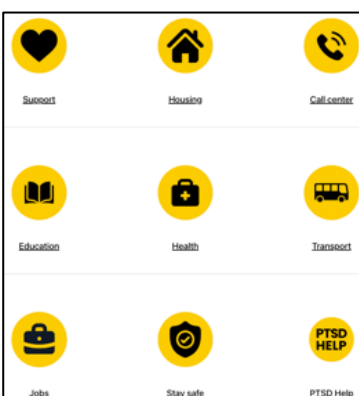
Dopomoha.ro is a web platform that supports an effective sharing of resources, such as transport, food and shelter. The platform was developed in Romania in response to the refugee crisis. It allows NGOs, citizens and private companies to register their available resources. National and UN agencies based in Romania can access and use the resources to help refugees, for example by finding safe accommodation. Close collaboration between the government and NGOs has facilitated the uptake of the solution.

Dopomoha means "Care for Romania".

RiskMap is a platform that harnesses citizen participation in collecting, displaying and disseminating local information without needing to install any new applications. The platform is relying on data from social media, input provided by social media bots and citizens. The main focuses are on urban environments and flood events. Through a live map, citizens are able to inform each other about dynamically changing situations in the city and help each other navigate to safety.

Use technology to strategically enhance the volunteer experience and contributions.

The app **Heartrunner** aims to initiate bystander cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) before the ambulance arrives, thus gaining a few minutes and increasing survival. Registered citizen responders in the area where the cardiac arrest happens are alerted. They may be asked to start CPR or to get an automated external defibrillator (AED). In this way, members of the public are engaged as additional health emergency resources. The solution illustrates an innovative use of mobile and location technology in a case where technology is indispensable for the well-functioning of the solution. Newsletters are regularly sent to the users with information about recent research results and CPR course opportunities to maintain the motivation of citizen responders.

Strengthen learning structures to advance the contribution of volunteers.

Red Cross Preparedness Guard is a method used at the Red Cross to organise volunteer efforts in local communities during emergency situations. The main aim of the Preparedness Guard is to facilitate local resource allocation during emergencies through having several volunteers that are easily reachable and prepared to contribute. A secondary goal has been to recruit volunteers to the Red Cross. It is a low-threshold opportunity for citizens to participate in volunteer work, as the people that

sign up for the preparedness guard will only be contacted in case of emergencies and have one day basic training a year. Citizens are informed and mobilised when required during emergency situations to carry out tasks such as for example transport, manning information posts at an evacuated area, traffic control, and administrative work like registering persons.

More information

1. ENGAGE website: https://www.project-engage.eu/about-engage-project-h2020/

2. Policy Brief: Communicating with citizens in a crisis. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10654703

3. Policy Brief: The involvement of spontaneous volunteers in disaster management https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10654630

4. ENGAGE Recommendations for Enhancing Societal Resilience: Public Warning https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10654567

5. ENGAGE Recommendations for Enhancing Societal Resilience: Takeaways for First Responders https://zenodo.org/records/10654531

6. Strengthening societal resilience to disasters: Improving engagement and communication among citizens and authorities https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10654421

7. ENGAGE Knowledge Platform, including the Catalogue of Solutions https://www.project-engage.eu/knowledge-platform2/