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Preparedness skills, sense of community and clear recommendations for action increase crisis preparedness

The COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and other social and global political crises and incidents have increased the need to understand the mental resilience, preparedness, agency and sense of community of Finns in various crises and disruptions. This memorandum presents information related to these topics collected via the Citizens' Pulse survey and citizen interviews commissioned by the Prime Minister's Office in March and April 2022.

Practical recommendations:

- 1. It is important to alleviate the fear of stigmatisation associated with preparedness.** The security situation has changed suddenly, and the need for preparedness is understood, but many are also afraid of being stigmatised as overreactive in their social networks. Many also have the idea that pharmacies will run out of iodine tablets and shops out of toilet paper if people put effort in preparedness. It is therefore important to communicate that preparedness is a civic skill that is appropriate for everyone, because it is also good to be prepared for less common situations.
- 2. Understanding of the different dimensions of preparedness should be strengthened.** The importance of having food stocks is obvious to most people, but water, for example, may be forgotten, and awareness of the need for other supplies (such as first aid supplies and fire extinguishing equipment) varies. The identification of incomplete and deliberately shared false information, as well as personal data security, should also be taken into account as an area of preparedness. Because the starting points are different depending on the place of residence and form of housing, different kinds of guidance and communication should be targeted at different localities, taking into account age and background-related differences in preparedness-related experiences, skills and motivation.
- 3. The communication of public authorities should include clear recommendations for action – citizens will act with or without proper knowledge.** Participation and a sense of community play an important role in crises and disruptions. During crises and disruptions, people want to receive support from others and help as they can. Helping others increases people's crisis resilience when they feel they can be of use – this should also be supported and coordinated appropriately by the authorities.

The *Citizens' Pulse* survey (9–14 March 2022) had 1,131 respondents and was followed by qualitative interviews delving deeper into the themes. These *citizen interviews* (26 persons) were conducted in cooperation with Kuudes design agency. The participants were aged 16 to 74, living in mainland Finland, with or without families, with different levels of education and different occupations, and their mother tongue was Finnish or a minority language (4 persons).

SENSE OF SECURITY: The war had an impact on Finns' sense of societal security

During the *citizen interviews*, it was noted that immediately after the start of the war, many people (especially those living near the eastern border) mainly feared a possible attack on Finland. However, younger interviewees were less concerned about various crises and disruptions. This observation is also supported by the *Citizens' Pulse* survey, in which 5% of 15–29-year-olds and 31% of 60–74-year-olds felt very concerned about the situation in Ukraine.

In the *Citizens' Pulse survey* in early March, nearly half of the respondents were concerned about the potential impact of the crisis in Ukraine on Finland's security, and an even larger proportion were concerned about the impact on the Finnish economy. The sustainability of society's economy and security caused more concern than personal mental wellbeing or financial situation, and nearly four out of five respondents considered their own personal security to be good in any case (77%). According to the survey, 59% of the respondents also felt concerned about the authorities' preparedness for serious incidents, such as the crisis in Ukraine. By comparison, the share of those concerned about or dissatisfied with the authorities' COVID-19 preparedness in *Citizens' Pulse* varied between 24% and 41% in 2020 and 2021. It seems that clear communication is needed on how societal security, risk management and preparedness are implemented in Finland.

PREPAREDNESS: Preparedness is understood in various ways, depending on the person's own background

The rescue services population survey¹ more widely identified citizen profiles related to themes of safety and security, and also noted that simple distinctions (such as city vs. sparsely populated area) do not sufficiently capture the differences in behaviour between different profiles. However, in the case of preparedness, the circumstances may have a significant impact on the practical issues and experiences of preparedness. The *citizen interviews* revealed that both concrete (first aid) and mental skills (resilience to pressure, rational action) were perceived as civic skills during crises and disruptions. In connection with preparedness, people mentioned emergency supplies at home, preparedness skills, mental preparedness, sense of community and societal preparedness. Information security skills and the recognition of misinformation or disinformation do not easily come to mind as civic skills for others than those familiar

¹ Rescue services population survey and population segmenting [Rescue services population survey and population segmenting \(Valtioneuvosto.fi\)](#)

with the subject due to their work. The recommended 72-hour minimum of emergency supplies at home was considered short by some, and some recalled that the emergency supply had been instructed to last several weeks². Preparedness is also associated with negative stigmatisation; people are wary of appearing to overreact or “panic” in their social environment. Many are also concerned whether shops have sufficient stocks.

Some of the interviewees felt that they lacked the know-how to deal with crises and disruptions. City-dwellers in particular often do not have experience of disruptions or accumulated know-how. For example, many people think that precautionary measures would not be necessary because, in the event of a power outage, they can go to the shop or order food delivery almost as normal, and if the situation continued, they would receive food distributed from the authorities’ emergency stocks. It is therefore worth clarifying the division of labour between individuals and society in the event of a crisis and, as far as possible, sharing information about how the society is prepared – for example, what is covered by emergency stocks. It would be good to clarify for city-dwellers the reasons why people should be prepared in the city as well. In sparsely populated areas, on the other hand, there is more experience of disturbances, but it is important to maintain awareness of *at least* 72 hours of emergency supplies at home, which can be motivated, for example, by the fact that a sufficiently prepared person can help an unprepared loved one or neighbour.

Age also influences preparation: the young people interviewed felt less prepared. This is also reflected in the *Citizens’ Pulse*, where one in five respondents aged 15–29 felt unprepared. The 45–59-year-olds felt best prepared; 59% felt their level of preparation was good. It should also be noted that some of the foreign-language population (approximately 8% of Finns³) have a very different experience of preparedness based on their personal experiences related to crisis situations. These experiences may lead to heightened concern, but also to only associating preparedness with serious crisis.

² The guidelines for minimum emergency supplies at home have been amended over the years from two weeks to shorter time frames to make them more accessible, especially to young city dwellers; see SPEK column in *Maaseudun Tulevaisuus* 12/2021.

³ Statistics Finland [statistics 2020](#)



Image above: Factors affecting preparedness can be divided into opportunity, capability (knowledge and skills) and motivation (values, attitudes and beliefs).

SENSE OF COMMUNITY AND ACTION: The importance of community engagement and one's immediate circle is emphasised during crises and disruptions

According to *Citizens' Pulse*, 92% of Finns can talk and share experiences with their immediate circle and community. About half of the citizens follow or participate in discussions on social media, and the majority (63%) are aware of who to contact if they need a listening ear to process a crisis situation. In the *citizen interviews*, loved ones were seen as an important resource – Finns want to be protected by others and also to give support to others. Even from the point of view of their own mental ability to cope, respondents saw their immediate social circle as an important source of discussion and support, although they also recognised that differences in mindsets could cause conflict. In general, many found it important to have an increased sense of community, and to work together on a common goal. Societal polarisation was seen as particularly damaging.

There is a readiness to help and participate during crises and disruptions, as long as people know how to help

Respondents had a positive stance on helping in crises and disruptions. The results of *Citizens' Pulse* show that, during a crisis, the majority of Finns (60–64%) are prepared to help financially, donate goods or volunteer in a crisis situation, and one in five would be prepared to provide accommodation for people fleeing a crisis area. Up to 86%

would be willing to volunteer at the request of an authority, which is slightly more than in the Finnish National Rescue Association (SPEK) survey in summer 2021 (77%). More than half of Finns (54%) want guidance on how best to help those affected by a crisis.

In the *citizen interviews*, the interviewees also said that they would probably help in crises and disruptions according to their own abilities, especially if the request came from public authorities. Some of the interviewees also pointed out that they could provide emotional support, for example by bringing comfort and lending a listening ear to others. People also felt they had motivation and even capability to help others, but they did not necessarily know how they could help. Some also felt inadequate in relation to the war in Ukraine without knowledge of ways to help. For this reason, it was seen as important that the authorities clearly give guidance on what kind of help is needed and how individuals can help in the situation. Helping can also calm the helper and alleviate the uncertainty brought about by the crisis through concrete action. Studies show that providing help to others has also been one of the factors protecting the mental health of young people during the COVID-19 pandemic⁴.

COMMUNICATION: During crises and disruptions, people desire objective and neutral communication about the overall situation, as well as clear operating instructions

The interviewees mainly wanted the most open and uncensored communication possible, but there was some concern about the “panicking” of others. In this sense, the interviewees’ speech reflected the so-called *panic myth*, where overrepresentations of panic and loss of self-control in popular culture descriptions of crises are thought to be an accurate reflection of reality. In actuality, with rare exceptions, behaviour in a crisis is sensible and aimed at helping others⁵.

Subjects which may cause concern in citizens can be communicated too, especially if the message contains a concrete proposal for action, that the individual is able to carry out. Clearer communication induces more people to follow the authorities’ communication as a channel for crisis communication. If the channels of the authorities are perceived as unclear sources of information, people’s attention will easily shift to the media (e.g., YLE, the Finnish Broadcasting Company). Foreign-language-speaking interviewees sought information from Finnish and international media, as well as from their own community (social media). More information on preparedness is also

⁴ Preston, A. & Rew, L. (2022). Connectedness, self-esteem and prosocial behaviors protect adolescent mental health following social isolation: a systematic review. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 43: 1, 32–41.

⁵ See also *Strengthening coronavirus response through behavioural understanding: Capabilities and opportunities of voluntary protection*, KETTU report 12/21 (p. 6).

needed in languages other than Finnish, and information on the 72-hour recommendations should be published in more minority languages. The table below summarises the interviewees' thoughts on what kind of communication they need in crises and disruptions.

Citizens' wishes for communication from public authorities

Where	What	How
Instant communication via text message (SMS) or WhatsApp.	Information on the overall situation and the course of the crisis (severity and estimated duration).	Clarity, informativeness and consistency in communication, so that there is no room for interpretation.
Yle's crisis releases and the 112 application are used as functional information channels providing local information.	Clear and local guidelines for action if an unusual course of action is required. What help is available and where?	Efficient, fast and actively updated communications.
Battery-operated radio (during electricity outages) for older people, social media for younger people.	What is Finnish society prepared for and at what level is the security of supply?	The tone of communication is neutral, appropriate and similar to that of authorities' communications.

SUMMARY

Citizens are more concerned about society's preparedness, economy and security than before. The crisis preparedness and mental resilience of citizens can be influenced by positive and clear communication about different forms of preparedness and ways of helping. By taking into account the different realities, places of residence, communities and information acquisition habits of Finns, we can also better reach different groups of people.

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Data availability: Citizens' Pulse <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/tietoa-koronaviruksesta/kansalaispulssi> The interview material is stored in the Finnish Social Science Data Archive <https://www.fsd.tuni.fi/en/>