



Volunteers and Local Authorities –
Baltic Sea Region Network (VOALA)

An overview of the analysis and conclusions identified in the VOALA project – Identifying challenges, good practices and recommendations for volunteering in civil protection in the Baltic Sea Region

Council of the Baltic Sea States
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Introduction

Challenges of volunteering in civil protection in the Baltic Sea Region

Effective disaster management requires an all-of-society approach and the involvement of diverse actors. Especially on the local level, disasters are never managed by a single actor alone but by complex networks of public authorities, civil society organisations and private actors. To adapt to the new challenges and improve the effectiveness of disaster preparedness and response in the Baltic Sea Region, there is a pressing need for well-established structures for cooperation, clear mandates for effective disaster management, strengthened community resilience, raised awareness of local knowledge and expertise, interpersonal relations and networks, and communication to civilians, especially to vulnerable groups, whose needs are often overlooked. The physical and mental health of the population should be taken care of, whereas the social and economic health of the community and other factors are no less important.

State authorities are not always able to assist all members of society or have the time, needed local knowledge, connections or capacity to address different needs. For this reason, gathering and engaging relevant state authorities and civil society organisations, improving coordination and cooperation with voluntary organisations, and strengthening individual preparedness are crucial.

Volunteer work is an essential pillar of a society's ability to cope with different kinds of threats and disasters. Volunteers can significantly contribute to how societies manage and mitigate the effects of various disasters and should play a prominent role in disaster management. However, the scope and effectiveness of volunteer engagement in emergency management varies considerably in the countries of the Baltic Sea Region.

While, e.g., the Nordic countries and Germany have relatively flexible and decentralised civil protection systems, the Baltic States have centralised systems. There are also differences in the extent to which the authorities cooperate with volunteers. Nordic countries and Germany rely significantly on volunteers for their civil protection systems. The other countries have gone through major political and economic transitions, which have impacted how civil society is viewed and what role volunteers play in society in general. The challenges and barriers to volunteering vary from one country to the next in the Baltic Sea Region. However, a comparison of national volunteering strategies across countries suggests that many challenges are common.

Based on the data gathered from the authorities and NGOs engaged in the VOALA project, the primary challenge in the Baltic Sea Region is not a lack of people willing to volunteer. The main challenges are limited resources of civil society organisations to engage, manage, and adequately train volunteers and a lack of coordinated cooperation between the civil protection authorities and voluntary organisations.

Regional Volunteer Centre in Gdańsk, Poland

The Regional Volunteer Centre in Gdańsk was established in 1997. Since 2001, it has been an independent association operating within the nationwide Federation of Volunteer Centers. Over the years, the centre has implemented projects emphasising the activation of local communities and projects aimed at changing the perception of volunteering and volunteers from social welfare activities to a conscious civic attitude.

The centre's goal is to disseminate the idea of volunteering and civic activity for organisations, institutions, and people and to comprehensively support people and institutions interested in such activity.

Its mission directs activities to build an active, participatory civil society based on the principles of equality and solidarity.

Many NGOs in the Baltic Sea Region have difficulties getting support from authorities, are not involved in and do not contribute sufficiently to policy analysis, policy making and strategy formulation at the national and local level. Collaboration and communication among civil protection authorities and volunteer organisations is limited and fragmented, leading in some instances to potential duplication of efforts and a lack of cohesive strategies. In many countries of the Region, there are no agreements regulating responsibilities and tasks between authorities and volunteer organisations.

Example from MSB coordinating work with 18 NGOs, Sweden.

There are 18 voluntary and member-driven defence organisations in Sweden, which have particularly important assignments in the area of civil and military defence of Sweden. These organisations and their role and relations to authorities are described in the Ordinance on Voluntary Defence Activities.

Voluntary defence organisations are independent groups established by means of a citizens' initiative since the early 1900s. They are voluntary and independent of each other and of the Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) and the Armed Forces, with which they cooperate. Organisations are funded by the MSB and the Armed Forces, including training volunteers and conducting tasks related to civil defence and the armed forces.

These organisations recruit and train volunteers for tasks within defence and contribute to increasing Sweden's preparedness in several areas.

Voluntary defence organisations are an important resource for civil defence and the Armed Forces. They recruit and train volunteers, boost the population's willingness and determination to defend national interests, contribute to the Armed Forces' recruitment of personnel, and organise youth activities.

Organisations often face difficulties in engaging with (national and international) counterparts and providing opportunities for networking and exchange of knowledge and experience.

The Ministry of the Interior of **Finland** in 2022 published National guidelines for rescue services for utilising volunteer resources in rescue operations. The aim of the guide is to promote cooperation between rescue services and volunteer organisations in rescue operations and create a national operating model to ensure the use of volunteers from a variety of organizations in Rescue operations. The guide was developed by a cooperation group involving rescue services and key voluntary organisations, outlining the duties of the rescue services in the utilisation of voluntary resources and the use of volunteers in rescue operations. It also describes what kind of training is required for firefighting and rescue work.

Other challenges identified by volunteer organisations are legal challenges. Effective engagement and coordination of volunteers requires watertight legislation, which either does not exist in all countries of the region, or there are other legal gaps that need to be addressed.

During the initial phases of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, **Liepaja, Latvia** experienced an influx of Ukrainian refugees. Responding to this humanitarian crisis, the local non-governmental organisation (NGO) "Tabitas Sirds" collaborated with Liepaja Municipality to establish a support centre. This centre served as a vital resource hub where refugees could access assistance, information, essential supplies, and various other necessities. Liepaja Municipality provided space for the NGO to operate the support centre, facilitating the community's collective effort to help the refugees. Moreover, the NGO "Tabitas Sirds" played an important role in coordinating volunteers, including those who spontaneously offered their assistance, thus amplifying the support network available to the refugees in need.

The lack of a developed framework or clear operating models for volunteers, especially spontaneous volunteers, significantly complicates cooperation. When it comes to spontaneous volunteers, there is no information about specific abilities and skills of volunteers and it is hard to organise them.

In **Finland**, a review was developed concerning the involvement of spontaneous volunteers. It defined how to involve spontaneous volunteers in different crises. The review concerns legal aspects, processing of personal data, work environment, insurance and working time issues. It also explains what to take notice of before starting the cooperation, when a crisis has occurred and what to consider after the crisis. Before cooperation begins, the capacities must be determined, the establishment of a registration centre, communication strategies and food supply must be planned. When a crisis has occurred, the suitability of spontaneous volunteers for an operation must be assessed, tasks suitable for spontaneous volunteers must be selected and a registration centre must be established. After a crisis, it is time for evaluation and thanking spontaneous volunteers by e-mail for their contribution. It is also good to organise an event for spontaneous volunteers where they can give feedback and receive a personal thank you for their help.

More info at: http://info.smedu.fi/kirjasto/Sarja_D/D1_2020.pdf

A shortage of and support for leading positions in volunteer organisations also present difficulties. The number of qualified volunteer leaders, especially young volunteers, committed to training young people in civil protection is insufficient in all countries of the Baltic Sea Region.

It was outlined by various organisations in the Baltic Sea Region that they lack solutions, tools and strategies for involving volunteers in civil security and for their longer-term engagement.

Since 2012, the city of **Warsaw** has actively supported the development of volunteering through various activities, including volunteer training, networking opportunities, grants, and the implementation of social campaigns. The Voluntary Service Development Unit (Zespół Rozwoju Wolontariatu) of the city of Warsaw promotes volunteerism by, for example, preparing analyses and reports and implementing various events and other activities in the Warsaw area with an aim to prepare volunteering opportunities in times of crisis. These activities are coordinated with the office for security and crisis management and other organisational units and entities.

For example, in 2022, to support refugees from Ukraine, the City Hall of Warsaw swiftly initiated volunteer recruitment, gathering 800 applications within 24 hours and ultimately registering 12000 people. Subsequently, 5000 people volunteered

across 30 different locations, including information points, transportation hubs, temporary accommodation facilities, charity collection centres, and administrative offices throughout Warsaw.

This crisis situation highlighted challenges in recruiting and coordinating spontaneous volunteers, leading to valuable insights. Key lessons include the necessity for a structured system to manage spontaneous volunteering efforts and the importance of developing online tools such as volunteer management applications. These lessons underscore the critical need to invest in the ongoing development of the volunteering system to better respond to future crises.

The dominant “security culture” based on “waiting for help from professional services” is a hindering factor as well in motivating and engaging volunteers in the civil security field.

Tallinn, Estonia has set a goal to enhance crisis resilience and provide citizens with security and confidence by establishing resilience centres in each city district – whose uninterrupted and sustainable operation is ensured through local systems, i.e. independent of the external electricity system. These are easily accessible buildings where people are used to go. These centres will provide help, information and consultation and act as a place of refuge and temporary relocation in emergencies.

In addition, Tallinn is setting up a reserve of emergency personnel made up of volunteers working in various institutions in the city. The aim is to assist the municipal police if needed and ensure the continuity of local government services in the event of a crisis.

Volunteers will assist at evacuation points, crisis centres and resilience centres to ensure the functioning of local government services and assist residents. For those who have joined the volunteer reserve, the municipal police will organise training sessions on evacuation, first aid, communication and other practical skills needed in a crisis.

Recommendations

The document summarises recommendations, addressing some of the aforementioned challenges, based on the expert input from the participants and speakers of the international and national events organised in the framework of the international project “Volunteers and Local Authorities – Baltic Sea Region Network (VOALA)”, funded by the Swedish Institute. Project activities were implemented in coordination with the parallel project BYFORES - Baltic Youth for Resilient Society, coordinated by the Finnish National Rescue Association (SPEK).

The VOALA project (2022–2024) aimed to enhance society’s resilience to natural and man-made disasters by strengthening inclusive, cross-sectoral cooperation between authorities and volunteer organisations in crisis management in the Baltic Sea Region. The project was led by the Council of the Baltic Sea States in partnership with the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB), State Fire and Rescue Service of Latvia, Union of the Baltic Cities (UBC), Finnish National Rescue Association (SPEK), Ministry of the Interior of Finland, Hamburg Fire and Rescue Service, and Danish Civil Protection League.

The recommendations result from a process of analysis, workshops and consultations in the Baltic Sea Region countries: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Sweden.

The recommendations stem from the national round table meetings organised with civil protection authorities and volunteer organisations in Helsinki, Hamburg, Riga, and Stockholm, the international conference “Volunteering in civil protection and disaster management: how to strengthen cooperation between authorities and volunteer organisations in the Baltic Sea Region?” on 19-20 June 2023 in Hamburg and the international round table for cities “Cooperation with volunteer organisations active in field of civil protection and building resilient society” on 12-14 September 2023 in Gdańsk. These events were attended by civil society organisations, civil protection authorities and other relevant state authorities at the national and local level, international organisations such as the Federation of the Red Cross Societies, UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), Nordic Council of Ministers, Union of Baltic Cities, academia and young volunteers from the countries of the Baltic Sea Region and beyond.

These recommendations target civil protection agencies and other state authorities which have the mandate to engage with volunteers in civil protection at the national or local level and civil society organisations.

Key recommendations

- 1. Strengthen collaboration and build trust between state authorities and voluntary organisations. Clear requirements must be introduced for state authorities, civil society organisations and municipalities on what is expected from each actor and how to work with disaster risk reduction in a structured way:**
 - a. Establish transparent and regular communication channels between civil protection agencies and voluntary organisations. Regularly share information about policies, plans, and ongoing initiatives. Clearly communicate roles, responsibilities, and expectations to avoid misunderstandings.
 - b. Involve representatives from both civil protection agencies and voluntary organisations in the planning and decision-making processes related to disaster risk reduction.
 - c. Organise joint training exercises and capacity-building workshops that simulate disaster scenarios. This collaborative approach allows both authorities and voluntary organisations to practice working together, understand each other's capabilities and responsibilities and identify gaps.
 - d. Acknowledge the valuable expertise and local knowledge that voluntary organisations bring to the table. Promote a culture of mutual respect and recognition between voluntary organisations and state authorities.
 - e. Establish mechanisms for exchanging data, research findings, and best practices. Effective collaboration enhances the overall capacity of the society to address disaster risks.
 - f. Develop formal partnerships and memoranda of understanding (MOUs) between state authorities and voluntary organisations. Clearly outline the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of each party. Such MOUs should also be signed at the local level between municipalities and voluntary organisations.
 - g. Schedule regular coordination meetings between civil protection authorities and voluntary organisations. These meetings provide a platform for ongoing communication, updates on projects, initiatives and discussions about existing and emerging challenges.

- 2. Increase awareness in society about existing and emerging risks and disasters, provide regular information about the role of individuals in disaster risk reduction and the importance of individual preparedness:**
 - a. Teach individuals concrete skills that are helpful in emergency situations.
 - b. Make individual preparedness an everyday task. Regular awareness-raising activities should be organised in different places such as schools, shopping centres, parks, other public places, fire stations etc. The organisation of yearly preparedness weeks where people are taught about, for example, fire prevention and fire extinguishing, first aid, and evacuation would be helpful.

Proactive Civil Defense Training in **Lithuania**.

In 2023, the Ministry of the Interior of Lithuania initiated an interactive civil safety educational project in 31 schools nationwide. The program targeted students in grades 9-12 in those schools that fall within the potential radiation zone of the Astravets nuclear power plant. The comprehensive training included theoretical knowledge and practical exercises, as well as using virtual reality glasses to simulate a radiation hazard scenario. With the help of modern technologies, young people were taught how to prepare for a possible nuclear accident, military threats and other disasters. The educational project "We are a team - we have a plan" aimed to empower students with skills to handle various threats and disseminate this knowledge within their social circles.

Children were informed about the warning sirens and the nearest collective shelter structures to which they may have to evacuate from their usual environment,

such as home or school. They also learned how to prepare for a disaster in advance — how to put together a departure bag, consider a family plan, and so on.

Incorporating virtual reality technology allowed students to experience simulated scenarios and practice their response strategies in a safe environment. By blending traditional teaching methods with cutting-edge technology, the government aimed to make the learning process more immersive and compelling, thus preparing the students for real-life situations.

In addition to providing students with the necessary skills, they were encouraged to spread the knowledge among their families and friends. This strategy transformed students into preparedness ambassadors, ensuring that the information reaches a broader audience and contributes to the community's resilience.

- c. Integrate civil protection education into school curricula, emphasising practical skills. Teach about civil protection from a young age to raise awareness and encourage the involvement of children and youth in disaster risk reduction.
- d. Collaborate on the development and implement national awareness-raising campaigns. Joint initiatives strengthen the credibility of the messaging and demonstrate unified efforts in promoting resilience.

An exhibition Scared or Prepared, **Sweden**.

Scared or Prepared is a travelling exhibition about the individual as a resource in society's preparedness for crises and war. The target group of the exhibition is young people in upper secondary school. The aim of the exhibition is to increase knowledge about security and preparedness from an individual perspective as well as increase awareness of one's own responsibility and how one can contribute in times of severe stress. It also wants to inspire and motivate schools to integrate the subject of civil preparedness into teaching to a greater extent. The exhibition is interactive and experience-based and is a so-called travelling exhibition in the form of a container which stands in the school area or is adjacent to various upper secondary schools. The exhibition is staffed by communicators, mainly young people themselves, from voluntary defence organisations. The project is carried out in collaboration between two state agencies (The National Swedish Museums of Military History and The Swedish National Heritage Board) and the voluntary defence organisations. The exhibition is free of charge and is financed by The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) between 2022 and 2025.

More information at <https://sfhm.se/radd-eller-beredd/>

3. Encourage volunteering and enable engagements of volunteers in civil protection:

- a. Create a database of volunteers at least on the local level. Map existing volunteer organisations and their skills for potential activation.
- b. Provide incentives for volunteering. Motivate and recognise volunteers' contribution through rewards, appreciation letters, joint events, training opportunities, volunteer cards (i.e. free cards to attend a swimming pool, reduced rates in public transportation etc.) and so on.

Youth leader card

Germany introduced an "Identification Card" (Juleica) for volunteers in the field of youth work. Cardholders can identify themselves as trained youth leaders/workers in front of legal guardians of the youth participants, schools or towards (non-)governmental authorities. Cardholders must be at least 16 years old and qualify as volunteers and as youth workers according to set standards. The Juleica initiative also offers the necessary education for said qualification.

Examples of their fields of work are work with regular youth group meetings, organisation of festivals, seminars, municipal initiatives or youth camps. Their goal is to volunteer for the needs of the young generation and let children and youth voice their interests.

In appreciation of the volunteers' unpaid work, the card allows for certain benefits. Benefits vary from region to region but can include reduced entry prices to cultural activities (cinema etc.) and sports (swimming pools etc.). The initiators (and thereby the participating parties) think that volunteers in the field of youth work add to the municipal/communal well-being, attractiveness and standards of local living and should therefore be shown appreciation.

While the concept is based on volunteers for youth work, the trainings, skills and qualifications such a volunteer has are considered to be exemplary and relevant in other areas, too. Employers also place great value on this qualification.

- c. Actively involve and listen to volunteers. Take their input seriously and involve them on a regular basis.
- d. Establish "community centres/houses/resilience centres" - it is especially important at the local level. Appoint a responsible person on the local level to coordinate cooperation with volunteers (organisations) in civil protection.

In **Germany**, several municipalities have established citizen participation (Bürgerbeteiligung) forums on issues related to civil protection.

For example, the state of Baden-Württemberg established a citizens' forum "Crisis-Resilient Society". The forum was intended to engage the public in discussions about various societal issues, gather opinions and thoughts of the public. The citizens' forum consisted of 48 people — residents of Baden-Württemberg who discussed various issues related to strengthening resilience of the state: the future of the health system, working conditions and training positions, generational conflicts, crisis communication, volunteer work, the role of social media in opinion formation and many other issues.

Based on these discussions the citizen's forum developed a set of recommendations. Some example recommendations are:

- In order to strengthen the resilience of society as a whole, we must establish an appropriate risk culture. We, therefore, recommend using the structures of the entire education system to strengthen citizens' risk awareness from an early age. This includes information about existing and possible risks and crises, tips on how to deal with them and measures to reduce any existing fears. Public broadcasting should also play an important role in the relevant educational work.
- In order to increase crisis resilience, the sense of community and the commitment of citizens should be more firmly anchored in society. In addition to "classic" commitment (e.g. fire brigades), forms of spontaneous, self-organised volunteers in crises and disasters should also be promoted. This can be done, for example, by compensating costs as unbureaucratically as possible and by providing better framework conditions for the release of employees. Existing coordination centres for engagement should also expand their capacities and networks so that they can also serve as contact points in crises and disasters and effectively coordinate assistance needs and capacities. If such positions do not yet exist in communities, they should be established.
- A crisis-resilient society needs strong involvement of society. Voluntary services can also play an important role here. The state should promote commitment to voluntary work.

- e. Create flexible volunteering opportunities, considering school and work schedules and other responsibilities. Consider approaches such as online courses and design flexible volunteering opportunities.
- f. Raise awareness of the clear role volunteers can have in civil protection.
- g. Provide training to volunteers and leaders of volunteers based on the nationally approved curriculum and other support such as mentoring, psychological support etc.

In **Finland**, the Emergency Services College is responsible for preparing, maintaining and developing the curriculum of contract personnel participating in rescue operations, training of corresponding trainers, maintaining the trainer register and producing teaching materials.

Contract personnel participating in rescue operations are required to undergo training in accordance with the curriculum of the Emergency Services College. Rescue departments must ensure that contract personnel have the training required by law. They organise the training themselves or buy it from rescue associations or the Finnish National Rescue Association (SPEK). SPEK provides materials for specialised courses.

Information on the training curriculum of Vapepa is available at <https://vapepa.fi/en/training/>.

- h. Create a profile of potential volunteers. Consider the motivation behind it, e.g., willingness to give back to society, educational aspects, social aspects, personal experience and others.

Specific recommendations on how to involve youth in civil protection activities are available at the [link to the website](#).