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Leaving No One Behind: Inclusive Climate Resilience in Greece

Athens puts accessibility for people with disabilities at the heart of disaster preparedness

A [2023 global survey](#) shows that persons with disabilities are at greater risk from climate-related hazards. In response, the [European Center for Forest Fires](#), in collaboration with the General Secretariat for Civil Protection and [the National Confederation of Persons with Disabilities/Institute of National Confederation of Persons with Disabilities and Chronic Diseases in Greece](#), is prioritising inclusivity by organising accessible disaster preparedness exercises in Athens – helping to ensure no one is left behind in the face of a climate emergency.

Key Learnings

- **Engagement:** Actively involving representatives from the disability community throughout the design, planning, and implementation phases led to tailor-made exercises in preparing for climate-related challenges. Their input helped tailor evacuation strategies to real-life needs.
- **Essential daily items:** It is important to secure essential items such as white canes, wheelchairs, and oxygen bottles during an evacuation. In case the rescue teams cannot save the essentials, the authorities should provide replacements immediately after a disaster.
- **Diverse needs:** Different disabilities require specific evacuation strategies. Emergency teams need to adjust their approach to support individuals with cognitive disabilities, mental health conditions, and hearing impairments.

About the region

Athens, the capital of Greece, is located in the Attica region, and has about 3,814,064 inhabitants ([2025](#)). The Region covers an area of about 39 km² with hot, dry summers and mild, humid winters characterising its climate. The present geographical features, including mountains and coastal areas, make it prone to natural hazards such as earthquakes, wildfires, and flooding.

Climate Hazards

Droughts, Extreme Heat, Wildfires, Flooding

Sector

Disaster Risk Reduction, Health, ICT

Key system

Health and Wellbeing

Greece
National Capital



Figure 1: Location Athens. Image Credit: Flickr.

Climate Threats

The [IPCC Climate Change Synthesis report released in 2023](#) stressed that human-induced climate change is already causing weather and climate extremes in every region worldwide. Athens is predicted to be one of the most affected cities in Europe. Extreme heatwaves and prolonged droughts, leading to more and more intense wildfires, put the populations at higher risk, who are more likely to be exposed, e.g. those who dwell near disaster-prone areas. When disasters strike, some groups, such as children, the elderly, or persons with disabilities, are at higher risk and more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Several factors may increase people's vulnerability, such as a lack of training and awareness, existing social or financial inequalities, and inaccessible buildings. Strengthening inclusive disaster resilience requires identifying the [different types of vulnerability drivers before, during and after a disaster](#) and providing a framework for actively engaging persons with disabilities in the early planning stages for disaster risk reduction.

Preparing Persons with Disabilities for Real-world Disasters in a Safe Setting

In response to the [2023 Global Survey Report on Persons with Disabilities and Disasters](#) and to further potential wildfire occurrences and to enhance inclusive disaster preparedness, Athens has recently organised and run an evacuation exercise, including a simulated fire scenario with the participation of persons with disabilities. The initiative's basis is the "leave no one behind" principle to include every group in disaster preparedness activities to reduce inequalities and vulnerabilities. Hands-on experiences of representatives from persons with disabilities, chronic diseases, and their families, trying to tackle existing barriers and drawbacks, highlight the importance of unhindered and equal rights in emergencies.

"To cope with emerging risks, disaster plans need to focus on inclusion and ensure no one is left behind. This includes integrating disability perspectives and involving persons with disabilities across all sectors."

Sofia Karma, Director ECFF, EUR-OPA Major Hazards Agreement, Council of Europe and Academic Staff at the National Technical University of Athens, Greece

Specifically, the exercise took place at the National Confederation of Persons with Disabilities (ESAmA) premises in October 2023 and among the participants were operational representatives from the Civil Protection, the Hellenic Fire Service and the National Centre for Emergency Care, representatives from the disability community, as well as academics, scientists and disaster risk experts. Their interaction during the evacuation exercise revealed crucial aspects regarding emergency management, addressing possible limitations or gaps during the evacuation process. "Saving essential items like white canes, wheelchairs and oxygen bottles during an evacuation, ensuring citizens can return to their daily lives quicker after a disaster" is essential.

Additional aids like disability cards could support rescue teams, promptly providing specific information about the person to apply appropriate support actions during an emergency. A recent study found that the Greek Disability Card is essential in an emergency evacuation because it allows the rescuers to immediately identify and respond to the individual's specific impairment. Moreover, the Card can serve as a useful digital tool for the local and regional authorities to register their citizens and visitors with disabilities.



Figure 3: Guiding techniques for persons with disability impairment in case of an evacuation need. Evacuation Exercise, 2023. Image Credit: ESAmA, City of Athens, Greece.



Figure 2: Safe evacuation of a person who uses a wheelchair when stairs are in a building. Evacuation Exercise, 2023. Image Credit: ESAmA, City of Athens, Greece.

Success Factors

The exercise's innovative aspects and added value were early engagement and meaningful consultation of the representatives from the disability community in all its phases (Design-Planning-Implementation-Active Involvement and Role-playing during the exercise). Critical aspects of inclusive disaster preparedness and response are:

- Training first responders in disability management techniques and providing them with the necessary equipment to evacuate persons with disabilities is mandatory.
- The one-size-fits-all model does not apply to persons with disabilities. Every kind of disability should be treated individually, including hidden disabilities such as diabetes, lung diseases and so on.
- Caregivers or personal assistants, including service dogs under specific circumstances, could facilitate the rescuers' job while searching for and rescuing a person with a disability.
- Accessible emergency messages, universal early warning systems, as well as accessible buildings and refuge areas, are crucial to secure disaster resilience for all.

“Collaboration with representative organisations of persons with disabilities, chronic diseases, and their families is the cornerstone to include their rights in each stage of disaster risk management. We always need to keep in mind not to leave anyone behind.”,

Ioannis Vardakastanis, President of ESAmE/IN-ESAmE/European Disability Forum-EDF

Further outputs of the exercise included an accessible [video](#) raising public awareness on the rights of persons with disabilities in emergencies and a training seminar for firefighters on disability management techniques, feeding into appropriate emergency response planning. The disability management techniques were also summarised in an accessible [video](#). Close collaboration between the government agencies, such as the Hellenic Ministry for Climate Crisis and Civil Protection, and the Confederation of Persons with Disabilities and its Institute (ESAmE/IN-ESAmE) enabled the design of an effective evacuation process. Fostering open communication enabled the identification of potential challenges, tools and solutions. The proactive involvement of persons with disabilities ensured a realistic and practical exercise, addressing their real needs in emergencies.

Enhancing Disaster Risk Management and Implementation – A General Perspective for persons with disabilities

Local action plans and Disaster Risk Reduction policies must align with disability needs, ensuring accessible infrastructure, information, and early warning communication, while promoting the active participation of persons with disabilities in preparedness training and cross-sector collaboration.

The [Ten Essentials for Making Cities Resilient](#) to support the implementation of the [Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction](#) at the local level, provide more details on resilient planning processes. The focus needs to shift from disaster response actions to disaster preparedness. Therefore, collaborations between policymakers and representative organisations of persons with disabilities, chronic diseases and their families are a prerequisite for including their rights in each stage of disaster risk management.

Key recommendations to ensure the visibility of persons with disabilities include:

- Universal implementation of the UN [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) (UNCRPD), meaning that the rights of persons with disabilities, chronic diseases and their families in all spheres of life are ensured, including their rights during the "Situations of risk and humanitarian crises".
- Improving legislation on protecting the rights of persons with disabilities, chronic diseases and their families in all phases of disaster management means that persons with disabilities are visible like any other citizen. For this reason, it is essential to strengthen legislation for data collection at national, regional and local levels.
- Data collection on disabilities supports effective policies, reducing the impact of disasters on such groups. A dataset on citizens with disabilities, including information on the type of disability, the place they live, and work, can facilitate their rescue while protecting personal data.
- Training responsible authorities and persons with disabilities on preparing Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans, including regular activation and testing under the inclusive preparedness exercise framework.

Improving Disaster Management Plans is a multi-dimensional aspect requiring the involvement of different stakeholders who may cooperate with the civil protection organisations. Based on the issues discussed during the exercise in Athens, plans need to incorporate the following actions:

1. Cooperation between central, regional and local administrations, while drafting and updating civil protection plans and engaging the disability community.
2. Raising awareness among emergency management authorities and persons with disabilities about self-protection guidelines to strengthen their coping capacity.
3. Updating and upgrading organised, preventive civil protection evacuation exercises with the participation of persons with disabilities.
4. Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans with information on safe evacuations and appropriate levels of assistance for persons with disabilities and municipalities/other public administration services.
5. Accessibility of the built, natural and digital environment, public transport, information and communications etc.
6. Consultations with the representative organisations of persons with disabilities, chronic diseases and their families when designing policies, making decisions and implementing measures at the national, regional and local levels.

Summary

The inclusive evacuation exercise in Athens demonstrated the importance of designing emergency plans considering the needs of persons with disabilities. The European Center for Forest Fires, the General Secretariat for Civil Protection, and the National Confederation of Persons with Disabilities/Institute of National Confederation of Persons with Disabilities and Chronic Diseases in Greece (ESAMEA/IN-ESAMEA) have joined forces to prepare an exercise with the participation of persons with disabilities which can be used as a basis for organising similar exercises in the future, paving the way towards inclusive disaster resilience. The key takeaways highlight the value of early engagement of the disability community in designing, planning and implementing exercises, the necessity of securing essential items, and the importance of further developing evacuation strategies.

Further information

This article has been adapted from an original publication on PreventionWeb. [License](#).

- [Inclusive evacuation exercises in multi-hazard scenarios: lessons learnt from Greece | PreventionWeb](#)
- [ECFF](#)
- [General Secretariat for Civil Protection](#)
- [ESAMEA](#)
- [IN-ESAMEA](#)

Representative publications

- [Flames of Change “Special Report on Disability Inclusion in Disaster Risk Reduction and Prevention”, MCR2030, UNDRR](#)
- [“Leave No One Behind: Active Involvement of Persons with Disabilities in Disaster Preparedness and Response towards Strengthening Inclusive Disaster Resilience”](#)
- [Multi-hazard risk approach and inclusive community engagement in disaster risk management: Experiences and lessons learned by a recent wildfire event in the Greek island of Rhodes amidst COVID-19 pandemic crisis](#)

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