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Inclusive Disaster Management: Best Practices for Protecting Vulnerable Groups

A collection of local success stories from Austria

These best practices show how climate threats and disasters affect vulnerable groups and highlight examples of their inclusion in emergency and disaster planning at the local level in Austria.

Key Learnings

- **Engaging relevant stakeholders**: Broad participation is essential, particularly from representatives of vulnerable groups. These may include specially established associations, hospital and care facility operators or resident representatives.
- **Utilising multipliers and existing structures**: Reaching some target groups can be challenging, making multipliers valuable for tasks such as delivering mobile care services. In smaller communities, long-standing municipal and fire department staff have extensive experience and local knowledge. Documenting and preserving this expertise ensure it remains available for future use.
- **Understanding the target group**: Vulnerable groups are diverse and require tailored communication approaches. A thorough analysis helps identify the most effective channels, including multilingual and plain language materials, public notices, email campaigns, social media, local calendars, and training trusted community representatives to share key information.

About the region

Austria is a landlocked country in Central Europe, with the Alps shaping much of its terrain and covering about two-thirds of its territory. A rich variety of features, including mountains, valleys, lakes, and lowlands, particularly in the eastern regions characterise the country's landscape. Climate change is contributing to rising temperatures, accelerated glacier melt, and more frequent extreme weather events such as heatwaves and heavy rainfall.

Climate Hazards

Extreme Heat, Flooding, Storms

Sector

Disaster Risk Reduction

Key system

Health and Wellbeing

Climate Threats

Climate change is affecting Austria in multiple ways, with average temperatures expected to continue rising until mid-century. Predictions see hotter, drier summers, with approximately twice as many days exceeding 30°C compared to current levels. Temperature increases are likely to cause more high-intensity rains due to increased evaporation and higher moisture capacity in the atmosphere, causing floods, more hailstorms, and landslides. Longer droughts may reduce soil moisture, accelerate glacier melt, and increase pest invasions from species adapted to warmer climates. A thawing permafrost heightens the risk of rockfalls and destabilises avalanche infrastructure in alpine regions.

Vulnerable groups, climate change and disaster management: collection of best-practice examples

People with disabilities, children, the elderly, and individuals with language barriers are particularly vulnerable to floods, heatwaves, blackouts, and similar disasters and require tailored protection measures. To better understand the role of economically, institutionally and socially marginalised groups in society, the VULKANO project (in German) explored best-practice examples of people with disabilities, the elderly, and people with language barriers in emergency and disaster planning at the local level in Austria. The Disaster Competence Network Austria (DCNA) coordinated the project, involving Geosphere Austria, Boku University, and the Environment Agency Austria.

Working with disaster experts, researchers, local authorities, and representatives of vulnerable groups, the project followed a four-phase approach:

Phase 1: Example Collection

Researchers and disaster experts identified initiatives in emergency and disaster protection planning that specifically addressed vulnerable groups. Short interviews with organisations active in the field, such as Gesundheit Österreich GmbH (National Research and Planning Institute for Healthcare), supplemented

the desk research. This screening identified 46 examples, including five from German-speaking regions in other countries.

Phase 2: Example Selection

The team developed best-practice criteria based on identified climate-related stresses, possible incidents, and associated vulnerable groups. These criteria were discussed and validated in a workshop with representatives from districts, state authorities, emergency response organisations, and vulnerable groups. Using the criteria, the team selected 18 examples for further study. Two thematic workshops – one focusing on the challenges of heatwaves and their impact on vulnerable groups, and another on the diverse needs of people with disabilities – provided additional insights for the selection process.

Phase 3: Factsheet Development

For each of the 18 selected examples, the team conducted structured interviews with project managers or responsible persons. The profiles described local climate-related stresses, vulnerable groups addressed, stakeholders involved, challenges faced, and critical success factors. They outlined strategies used by municipalities and organisations to address hazards such as heat, cold, floods, and wildfires, ensuring a combination of proactive urban planning, responsive emergency systems, and inclusive policies.

Figure 1: Example of a factsheet developed. Image Credit: Klima- und Energiefonds.

Phase 4: Formulating Recommendations

The project results led to the following recommendations and success factors for including vulnerable groups in emergency and disaster planning at a local level:

1. Involve all relevant actors and stakeholders,
2. Foster cooperation between non-related sectors (e.g. natural scientists and the Disability Council) to learn new perspectives on inclusion,
3. Use existing structures such as KLAR! regions (regional associations for climate change adaptation) or multipliers such as mobile care services to better reach the target group,
4. Develop and continuously practise hazard scenarios, involving vulnerable groups, to identify improvement potential in risk management planning,
5. Use diverse communication channels to reach all those affected,
6. Apply scientific findings in practice to broaden the local perspective.

"Vulnerable groups must be more strongly considered in disaster planning. The VULKANO project presents concrete ways to enhance their safety and access to support. Only in this way can we achieve more effective and fairer crisis management.",

Christian Resch, Managing Director DCNA

Figure 2: Participative creation of evacuation maps in case of flooding. Image Credit: © KLAR! Mühlviertler Kernland.

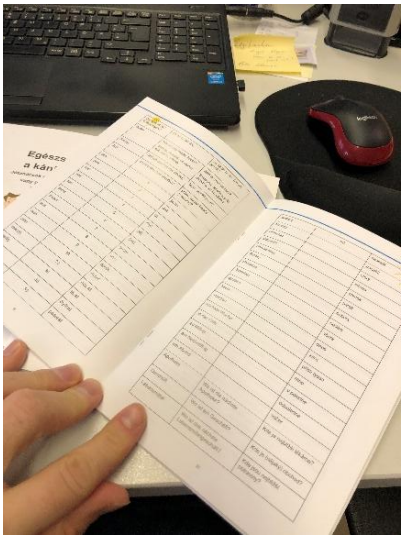

Figure 3: Dictionary (in different languages) with relevant vocabulary related to heat waves for home nursing personnel. Image Credit: © KLAR! Regionen Weinviertel Süd und Kampseen.

Summary

Through collaboration with local authorities, disaster experts, and representatives of vulnerable groups, the VULKANO project identified, evaluated, and documented 18 best-practice examples from Austria and other German-speaking regions. These examples – compiled in detailed factsheets – demonstrate innovative, inclusive approaches at municipal, organisational, and project levels. The findings translate into practical recommendations to help cities and municipalities better integrate vulnerable groups into disaster risk management in the context of climate change.

Further information

The work presented in this adaptation story is part of the VULKANO project.

The factsheets are available for download on the website of the Climate and Energy Fund (in German only): https://www.klimafonds.gv.at/projekt/vulkano/

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