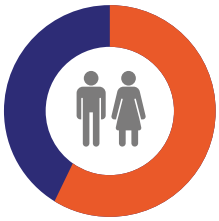
European Commission

Humanitarian Aid & Civil Protection

WHY ARE **BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS IMPORTANT** FOR WHOLE-OF-SOCIETY DISASTER PREPAREDNESS?



65% of Europeans feel that **they need more information to be able to prepare** for disasters or emergencies

Being prepared for Europe's changing risk landscape is essential to building societal resilience. Special Eurobarometer **547** pinpointed several areas of improvement in population preparedness, which are now being addressed through key actions under the **Preparedness Union Strategy**. Even if informed, there can be other factors that influence actions, often leading to less rational and more emotionally driven choices.

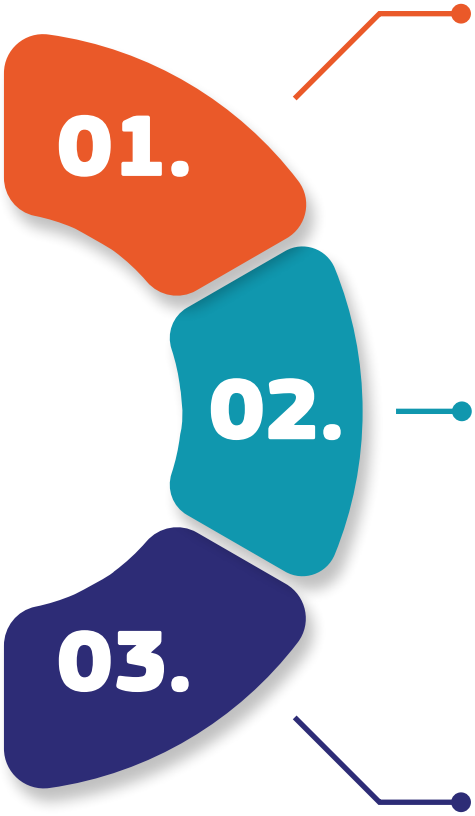
Behavioural and social sciences aim to understand the factors that influence an individual's decision-making and behaviour. In this way, they can help design solutions that align with how people process information and make decisions, **ensuring that preparedness efforts are accessible, motivating, and easy to act on, ultimately resulting in effective disaster resilience activities.** By addressing behavioural barriers, behavioural insights can motivate stakeholders to act on these high-return investments, reaching predominantly more cost-effective solutions, according to benefit-cost ratio (BCR) studies.

The added value of behavioural science for disaster resilience activities

Applying knowledge from behavioural and social science can help explain why people do not take the necessary measures to prepare in the period before a disaster happens or why they act contrary to expectations during a disaster.

In general, people struggle to correctly perceive the risk of low-probability /high-impact disasters and may, therefore, underprepare for such events. A lack of preparedness can be exacerbated by an **optimism bias** – the belief that bad things are less likely to happen to oneself than to others, as well as an overestimation of one's own ability to respond. During a disaster, contrary to common belief, there is a risk that people underreact, possibly driven by an inaccurate perception of the actual threat they are facing. In uncertain or unprecedented events, people also tend to look to others to inform their own behaviour. Untimely or poorly targeted warnings, false alarms, scarce information, misunderstandings or even misinformation – whether spread deliberately or not – can further increase uncertainty and lead to wrong or untimely actions**. Reducing uncertainty and ambiguity** in an accessible and easy-to-act-on manner during emergency events is therefore vital. Behavioural science helps us **effectively target different population groups to maximise the impact of our disaster resilience activities.**

Behavioural challenges throughout the disaster risk management cycle



Preparedness

Evidence suggests that the often-taken approach of simply advising people on the risks they may face in their region is insufficient to motivate preparedness behaviours. **Important psychological and social barriers can prevent people from adopting critical safety behaviours,** such as myopia (focusing on possessions in the short-term rather than lives in the long-term), optimism bias (believing bad things are less likely to happen to oneself), lack of trust or awareness, social influences, and past experiences. Identifying and understanding these barriers and heuristics can make risk communication activities significantly more effective.

Knowledge about preparedness and changing risks, a sense of urgency, and understanding of the risk of low-probability/high-impact disasters varies significantly between population groups, for instance seasonal labourers, youth, homeless or migrant populations..

Response

During disasters, having strong and tested communication methods in place, with timely and up to date information flows, accurate guidance through trusted communication channels is important and can make essential differences in lifesaving actions, such as evacuation information.

Understanding **different cultural values** can increase the understanding of how warnings are trusted, understood, or used, leading to more **inclusive and targeted approaches for behavioural change.** Improved preparedness will also lead to better response.

Recovery

Different psychological and social dynamics emerge in the aftermath of a disaster. Community-based mental health and social support can facilitate timely learning, paying attention to **hindsight bias** (the tendency to believe past events were predictable or inevitable) and **sunk cost fallacy** (the phenomenon where someone is hesitant to abandon a course of action even when it would be beneficial because they have already invested in it), to promote adaptive behavioural changes.

Practical tools and solutions:

A **wide stakeholder base** and **co-creation methods** support effective behavioural change in a whole-of-society approach. Engaging content and information delivery is essential to capture attention, especially since preparing for a disaster rarely aligns with the urgency of response efforts. These include innovative human-centred approaches, such as featuring trusted local musicians or influencers to address mistrust and complexity. Engaging local churches, SMEs, or other **politically or culturally driven groups** can help to reach different population groups.

Establishing inclusive environments for **learning, collaboration and co-creation** between different stakeholders across different sectors of society can boost citizen engagement and reach previously non-targeted population groups. **Early involvement of stakeholder groups** in the design of warning or alert messages allows for making risk communication activities substantially more effective.

Recognising that disaster preparedness is not a one-size-fits-all endeavour is vital, as behaviours and responses vary widely depending on the disaster type and the affected populations' heterogeneity.

More details available on the online knowledge page from all contributors.

This primer has been compiled by the European Commission, the World Bank, the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre, and the Delft University of Technology, based on existing evidence.

Publications Office of the European Union

Union Civil Protection Knowledge Network

DOI 10.2795/8721896