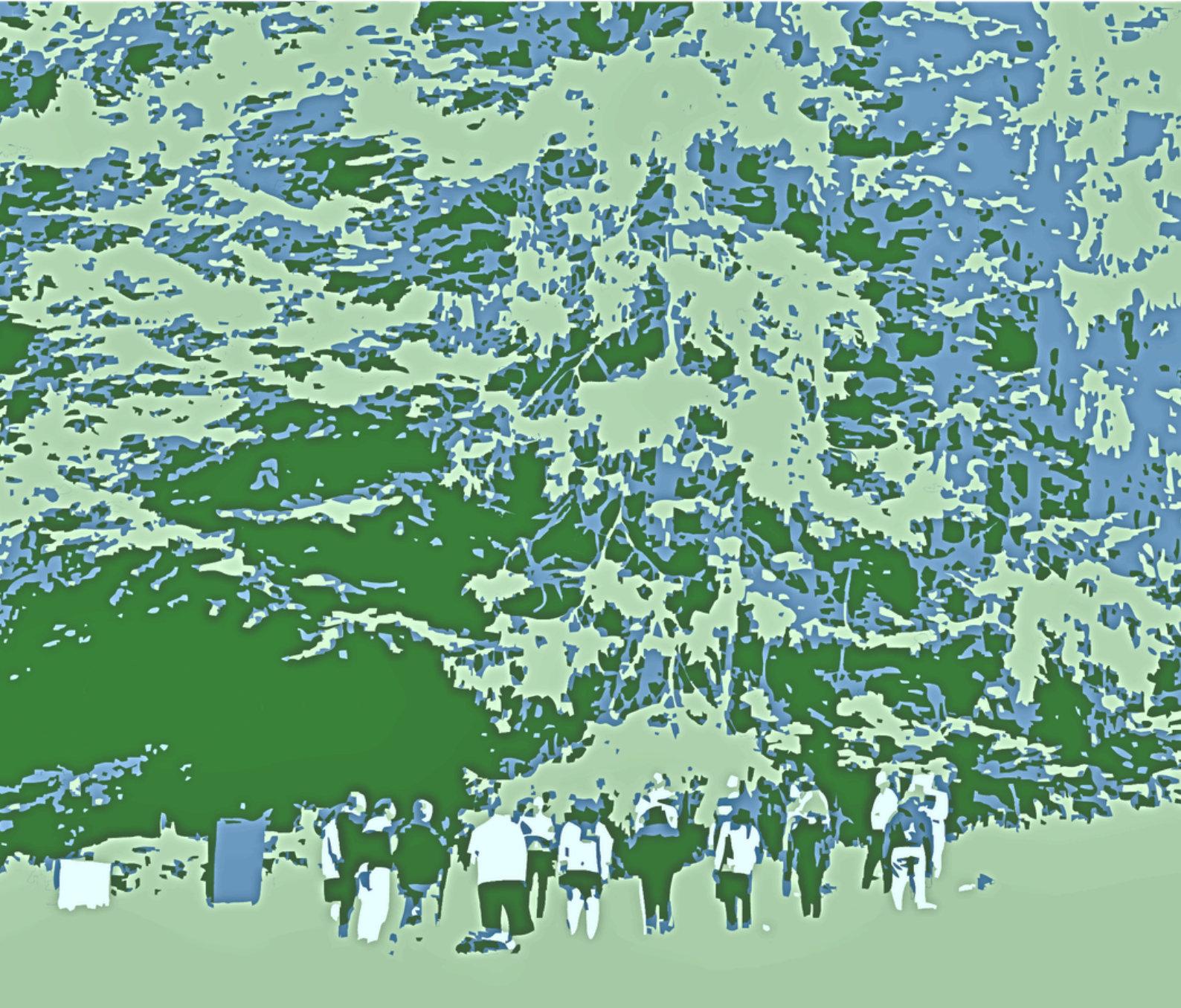




BEYOND READINESS

SALTO EASTERN
EUROPE &
CAUCASUS

f r s e
Fundacja Rozwoju Systemu Edukacji

 **EUROPEAN
SOLIDARITY
CORPS**
THE POWER OF TOGETHER.

Before you read on...

You may wonder whether preparedness is relevant to transnational youth work.

When we introduced preparedness into the non-formal, international youth education field, we met a wide range of reactions. At one end, some people fully understood it and felt it was essential, noting that it had always been present in youth work and international training. At the other end, some people claimed that preparedness would lay a sense of insecurity over non-formal education, bring daily visions of catastrophe, and evoke associations with the military.

Wherever your own opinion sits on this spectrum, we invite you to read this article. Perhaps this story will open up a new understanding of what readiness beyond can mean.

What does being prepared mean to you personally?

When you hear the word preparedness, what is the first image that comes to your mind?

Place for your note..

.....

.....

.....

- A backpack packed and ready to go?
- An evacuation plan?
- Knowing where to find reliable information?
- Someone who stays calm when everyone else is overwhelmed?
- Or perhaps something much quieter: knowing yourself well enough to recognise when you are reaching your limits,
- knowing who you can turn to,
- and being able to make a decision when there is no perfect answer?
- other?

“There is no right answer here. The way we understand preparedness says something about how we understand uncertainty, and how ready we are when inevitable change comes suddenly.”

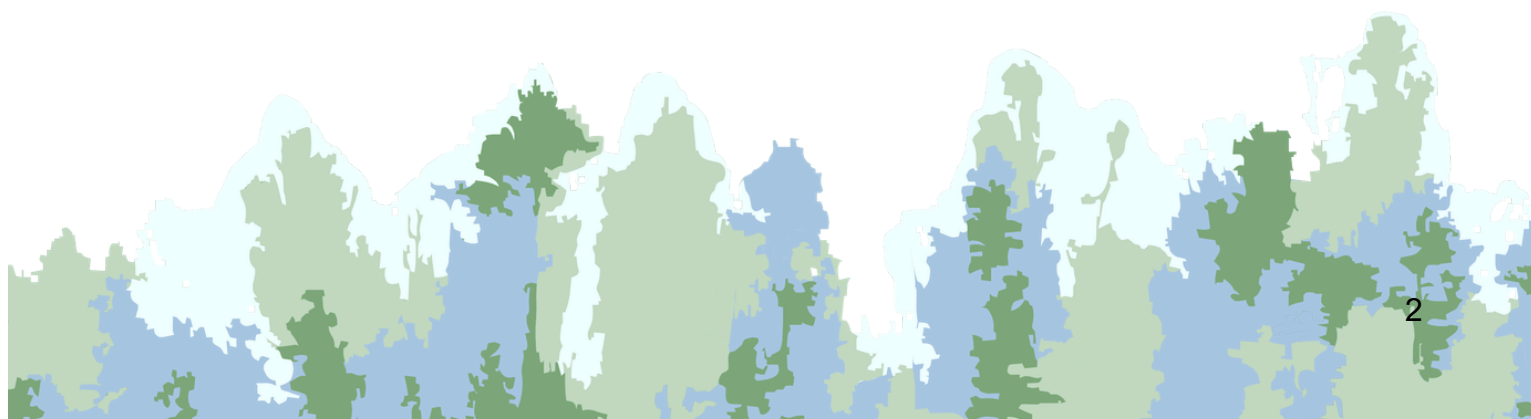


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WHY ARE WE TALKING ABOUT PREPAREDNESS NOW?

For a long time, preparedness had often been associated with emergency services, safety procedures, risk assessments and emergency equipment. These things still matter. But the world we are preparing for is becoming increasingly difficult to describe through one emergency, one risk or one plan.

We live in a time of overlapping disruptions: geopolitical tensions and war, climate-related events, public health crises, technological and cyber risks, information manipulation, displacement and social polarisation. These situations do not always arrive one at a time. They can overlap, influence one another and change faster than our plans can. The term “policrisis” has become an everyday concept, mentioned at the policy level, in the media, and in regular meetings among random people.

The European Union has responded to this changing landscape by placing preparedness much more visibly on the European agenda. The 2025 Preparedness Union Strategy describes preparedness as an all-hazards and whole-of-society effort and explicitly includes education, training and youth programmes within the wider preparedness landscape.

This shift matters.

“Because if preparedness belongs to everyone, it cannot belong only to emergency professionals.”

It also belongs to communities.

To organisations.

To educators.

To volunteers.

To youth workers.

To us, the trainers, facilitators or young leaders who create spaces where others learn, connect and act together.

“Preparedness is not only about what happens out there”

Imagine something serious happens during an international youth activity.

- How do you react?
- How do the young people in your group react?
- What about the wider context: the people around you, the location, the way decisions are made?
- What happens when the original plan no longer works?

“At that moment, preparedness is not simply a checklist.”

- It is also the ability to **notice what is happening inside yourself** while remaining available to others.
- It is **knowing how stress affects your attention and decision-making**.
- It is recognising your limits before you reach exhaustion.
- It is being able to regulate yourself enough to think clearly. It is knowing how to offer psychological first aid without taking control away from others.

It is also relational.

How do you listen when you are under pressure? How do you build trust before a crisis happens? How do you communicate clearly when information is changing? How do you work across cultural differences and include people whose voices may easily be missed?

And we are describing this situation from a perspective of wholeness - which means **it is systemic.**

How do you distinguish what you know from what you assume? How do you understand the wider context? How do you recognise early signs of escalation? How do you connect local action with the larger systems and structures around you?

The Preparedness Competence Compass

This Competence Model, developed during the first edition of the Preparedness Workshop in the Polish mountains, brings these dimensions together. It describes preparedness through four interconnected areas:

- 1. Inside of Me - Self-regulation and Stress Management;**
- 2. In Action - Crisis Competence;**
- 3. With Others - Relational Capacity;**
- 4. and In the System - Systemic Strategy.**

They are not four separate quadrants. They are four ways of looking at the same question:

How can we remain capable of responding when the situation becomes uncertain?

This article begins from the belief that preparedness does not start when the crisis arrives.

It starts **much earlier.**

In the way we **know ourselves.**

In the **relationships** we build.

In the **questions** we ask.

In the **systems** we map and navigate.

This article is not intended to give you the answer to **preparedness**. It invites you into a process of discovery.

TOP WORKSHOP THAT STARTED IT ALL



Five days of learning to meet uncertainty, where a competence model could be designed and elaborated around a table.

“Preparedness, however, is harder to understand while sitting still and talking about it”.

It needs to be experienced: in the body, in relationships, in decisions, in changing environments and sometimes in situations where the plan simply stops working. From **24th to 29th August 2026**, 16 participants, two trainers, two SALTO EECA representatives and one Polish NA officer came together in **Korbielów, Poland**, surrounded by the Beskid Żywiecki mountains. The training brought together trainers working with European Solidarity Corps volunteers, project coordinators, youth workers, mentors etc., coming from Programme and Partner countries (Armenia, Italy, Belgium, Tunisia, Poland, Georgia, Ukraine, Greece, Egypt, Germany). The deliberate diversity of the group meant that different experiences, systems and understandings of crisis entered the same learning space.

The training was facilitated by Dagna Gmitrowicz and Mariia Herashchenko, with the support of SALTO EECA, Anna Hryshkevych, Tomasz Szopa, representative of National Polish Agency Agnieszka Jankiewicz-Kiryk and the hosting partners. Its purpose was not to give participants another checklist to complete. From the beginning, the invitation was different:

This is not a course about ticking the “preparedness” box.

Instead, participants were invited to ask uncomfortable questions, challenge assumptions and explore what it means to be ready - and how trainers and youth workers can help build a culture of preparedness among young people, volunteers and local communities.

And so, the journey began.

The Tangible and the Imaginary Dragons entered the room

Two dragons appeared.

One represented the real moment, the real danger (the fire has started, the storm has arrived, the war has broken out, the volunteer calls for help, ...)

The other dragon lives in our imagination. It whispers, “What if something terrible happens?” and “What if I fail?” Often this dragon triggers a stress reaction in a moment of peace. Sometimes it protects us by helping us prepare; sometimes it makes us fight battles that never come. Between these two dragons lies the whole kaleidoscope of our emotions.

EASE

CURIOSITY

ALERTNESS

TENSION

ANXIETY

FEAR

PANIC

'No matter the Dragons', people can experience this whole spectrum; even in the same situation, different people experience different emotions. In this training, we were trying not to defeat the dragons but rather to recognise which dragon was walking beside us, to notice what's happening inside us, to understand how uncertainty influences our decisions and how to develop a competence to respond wisely.

Participants created these two dragons together, asking themselves:

- What is alive when this or that dragon comes to my mind?
- What emotions travel with it?
- What happens in our bodies when it appears?
- Who are these dragons in our lives and in our communities?

The dragons were deliberately playful. They allowed something serious to become visible without immediately needing to solve it.



And they stayed with us.

The following days repeatedly returned to the question:

How can we learn to walk beside our dragons rather than be overwhelmed by them?

This became an important shift in our understanding of preparedness.

“Preparedness is not only about controlling what is outside us. It begins with recognising what is happening inside us.”

From the body to action

The second day of the workshops moved into stress physiology, regulation practices, embodiment and sensory awareness. We explored what stress does to the body and mind, the window of tolerance, grounding and breathing, and the difference between being able to push through something and actually being prepared.

This gave the first dimension of the emerging model a very human starting point:

Inside of Me

Can I stay functional under stress?

The model describes this as self-regulation and stress management: understanding our stress responses, using regulation practices, recognising our limits and treating rest and recovery as part of preparedness. But the training did not allow us to stay inside ourselves for too long. Preparedness eventually has to become **action**.

The mountains became our learning space

On the third day of the workshops, we left the training room and walked into the mountains. The hike to the **GOPR mountain volunteer rescue centre** became a way of learning.

Along the way, participants encountered practical preparedness tasks and reflections around the themes of uncertainty, evacuation, hazard zones, and psychological first aid. Our group had a chance to witness the mountain rescuers who deal with emergencies as part of their everyday reality. We explored what rescue, non-governmental organisations do, how emergency procedures work and what happens when preparedness becomes a matter of real responsibility. After every station, each participant highlighted something on a dragon card: a thought, a question, a wisdom worth carrying forward. Later, those cards were shuffled and exchanged between groups, so someone's individual reflection became another person's material for discussion.

This was an important metaphor for the whole training:

“Preparedness grows when we carry not only our own knowledge, but something we have received from others.”

The emerging model therefore placed crisis competence alongside self-regulation and co-regulation:

In Action

Do I know what to do, and how to do it?

This includes first aid, risk assessment, prioritisation, decision-making under pressure, evacuation and shelter, but also the ability to adapt when circumstances change. The model explicitly treats plan failure as an expected condition rather than an exception.

Preparedness became relational

Then the focus shifted again. We came to an idea that trust cannot simply be switched on when a crisis begins. And that cultural sensitivity becomes especially important when people who have very different experiences of crisis are suddenly expected to act together.

This gave us another question:

With Others

How can I act with others under pressure?

The competence model describes relational capacity as the ability to communicate clearly under pressure, listen when it is difficult, build trust before a crisis, work across differences, support vulnerable groups, distribute roles and sustain collective action.

Then we zoomed out

On the fourth day of the workshops, the Warm Data Lab, inspired by Nora Bateson, invited participants to look at preparedness through different contextual lenses. Instead of searching immediately for one correct answer, we moved between perspectives and noticed how the meaning of a question changes when the context changes. This was particularly relevant to an international group. Preparedness in one country cannot simply be copied into another. People do not have equal access to information, infrastructure, institutional support, emergency services or community resources. People also carry different histories. For some participants, a crisis was an abstract possibility. For others, it was part of everyday life. This led to another dimension:

In the System

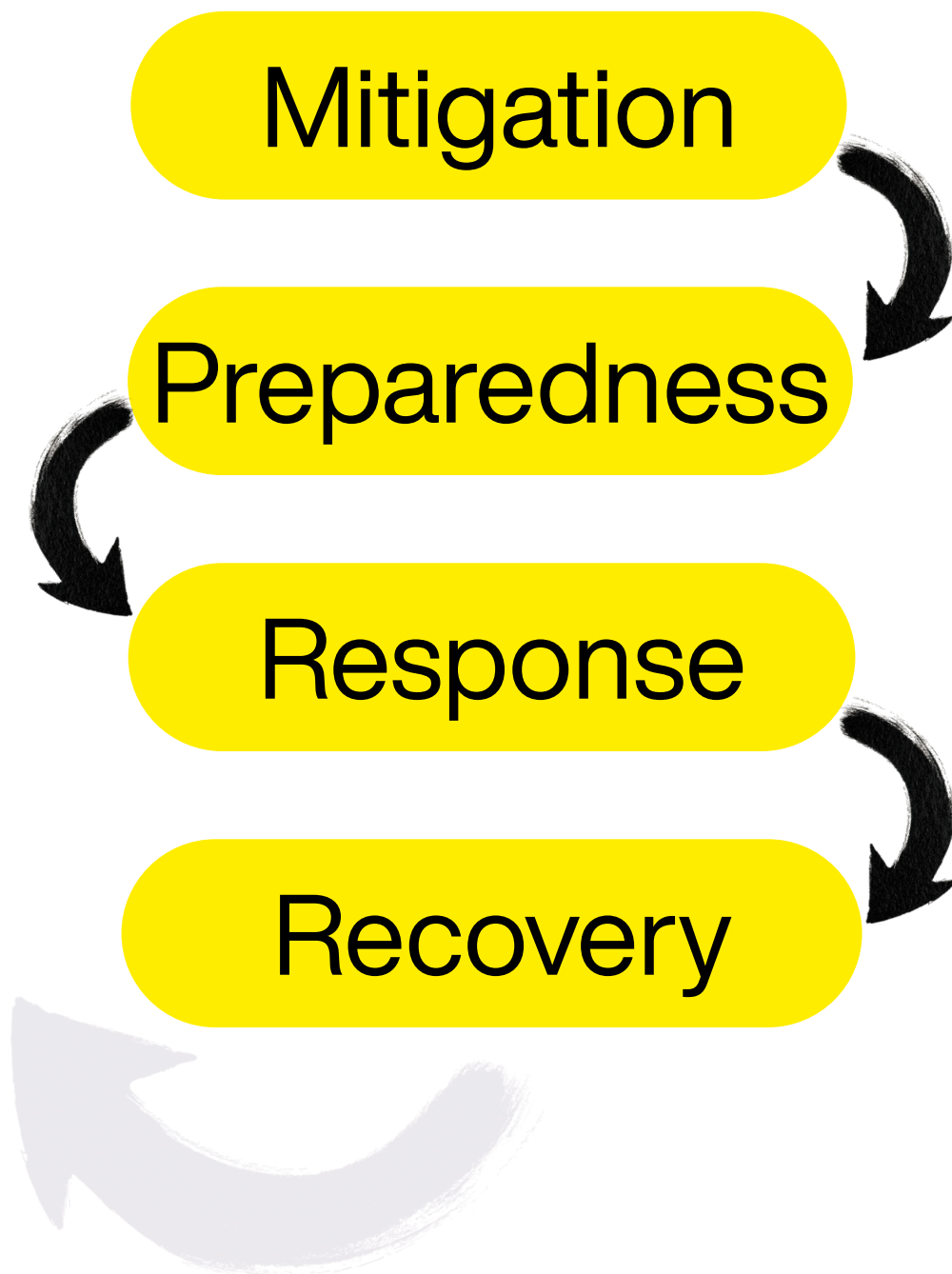
Do I see and know the bigger picture?

Here preparedness became connected with early warning, reliable information, institutional roles, the EU Preparedness Union Strategy, the context, community resources and the continuous relationship between mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery.

And then came the Princess

On the final day of the workshops, we brought the learning together through a simulation game: The King's Watch. It was playful on the surface, but underneath it asked a serious question: Do we understand preparedness as something that happens before the crisis, or as a continuous cycle?

The game allowed participants to move through the four stages:



rather than treating a crisis as one isolated moment. This became particularly important because the model itself argues that these stages overlap and feed into one another: recovery from one event can become preparation for the next. The princess did not simply need to be “saved”. The group had to think about what could have been done before, what was needed during, and what would matter afterwards. And perhaps this was the final reminder of the week

“Preparedness is not a moment. It is a cycle.”

The last day finished with compiling the full Competence Model, considering all contributions, experiences of the participants and reflections. The live experience, communication, contexts, abilities, perceptions and visions came together to formulate the new version of the Model. And it helped all of us to plan what to do next when we are back home in our communities.

The **Care Kit** became a physical and symbolic collection of these resources: practices, questions, insights, relationships and actions that could be taken back into local contexts. And this is where the five days came together. We had started with two dragons. We ended up with a care kit for walking with them.

What started as a training became something else

The training was designed to develop trainers' skills. But over the five days, something else happened. The group did not simply learn about a competence model. The group became part of its development. The draft model came into the room. Activities tested it. Different realities challenged it. Participants questioned its language. New connections appeared. Some concepts became clearer. Others needed to be reconsidered. By the end, we were no longer looking at a model that belonged only to its original authors. We were looking at a shared language of preparedness.

BUILDING THE COMPETENCE MODEL TOGETHER

From a draft to a shared language

A competence model can provide structure to something that otherwise feels overwhelming. Preparedness contains many different elements: stress regulation, first aid, decision-making, communication, relationships, information, systems and recovery. Without a framework, these can remain separate pieces.

The model helped us ask a different question:

- **What does a person need to be capable of when uncertainty becomes real?**
- **What am I already capable of, and which skills do I need to practise and discover?**
- **What is my community (system) capable of and what role am I willing to take?**

The first draft of the competence model was elaborated by the trainers, based on materials developed by the European Commission and communities of practice in youth work, to set the tone for the group work; it was a first attempt to dive into the topic, and this model was intended to be discussed, tested, experienced from within and in the group and used as a basis for reflection and transfer.

The whole training was split into 4 parts of the Competence Model, which we experienced during 5 days; some aspects were interlaced, showing that it's not just one part of the Competence that can be developed on its own, but everything is interconnected - to be able to act in the crisis, we need to know how to regulate ourselves to be able to build trust in the community, which takes effort, time, interpersonal skills, knowledge and resources about the communities.

- **The model met the dragons**

The dragons helped make the abstract competence **Inside of Me** tangible. Instead of simply saying "self-regulation", participants experienced uncertainty through movement, body awareness, imagination and reflection.

- **We encountered the uncertainty**

Blindfolded walks with few instructions, hazard zone protocol discussions, evacuation essentials and haste, and improvisation activities challenged the assumption that preparedness equals planning.

The model had to hold both:

- **prepare carefully**

and

- **be ready to adapt when preparation is no longer enough.**

This connects directly to the model's formulation that plan failure should be treated as an expected condition.

- **Context changed the answer**

.

The international group revealed that preparedness cannot be separated from context. A strategy available to one organisation or country may be unrealistic somewhere else. That strengthened the importance of contextual thinking, multiple perspectives and cultural sensitivity in **In the System** and **With Others**.

The model therefore did not become stronger by becoming more fixed. It became more powerful by becoming more questionable. Every question, statement and reflection from a participant created an opportunity to see something differently. Every different context challenged the idea that there could be one universal answer. Every activity showed us something that could not have been discovered through discussion alone.

This model belongs to everyone who interacted with it.



PREPAREDNESS COMPETENCE COMPASS



Have you ever asked yourself and your team the following questions?
Do you bring this topic onto the agenda within yourself, your team and your community?

INSIDE ME

Can I stay functional under stress?

IN ACTION

Do I know what to do, and how to do it?

WITH OTHERS

How can I/We act with others under pressure?

IN THE SYSTEM

Do I see and know the bigger picture?

INSIDE ME

Can I stay functional under stress?

Self-regulation and stress management

Preparedness begins before we act. It begins with noticing what happens inside us when pressure rises. The model includes understanding stress physiology, using regulation practices, recognising limits, and treating rest and recovery as part of preparedness.

Ask yourself how much you:

*** Understand your own stress physiology**

- Can describe what stress does to the body
- Distinguish between different types of stress
- Know the concept of the window of tolerance and can locate where your own tends to sit

*** Use regulation practices before, during and after stress**

- Have your own toolbox of regulation practices and update it regularly
- Are aware of your own coping strategies and understand how different coping mechanisms work
- Know how to recover after stress and recognise what you need to restore your energy, balance and sense of safety

*** Recognise your own limits early**

- Know the boundaries of your role
- Notice early warning signs before you hit a wall
- Can name what drains your energy and what restores it
- Do not confuse pushing through with being prepared

*** Build a personal network of experts and peers**

- Know who to call for supervision, debrief or expert advice before you need it
- Distinguish between needing operational help and needing personal support, and know where to find each
- Ask for help early instead of waiting until you are overwhelmed
- Delegate tasks that go beyond your expertise, or guide a person in need to an expert or specialist

*** Treat rest and recovery as part of preparedness**

- Reflect on and learn from your own actions
- Build rest intentionally into preparation, crisis response and recovery
- Recognise the difference between productive fatigue and exhaustion that affects your ability to function
- Become a role model for others

IN ACTION

Do I know what to do, and how to do it?

In the moment

Preparedness becomes visible when something happens. It is the ability to read a situation, decide without full information, adapt when the plan stops working, and care for the people around us. The model includes assessing hazard and risk, planning for evacuation and shelter, adapting when plans fail, deciding under pressure, and applying physical and psychological first aid.

Ask yourself how much you:

* Read hazards and risks accurately

- Assess a scene or situation for immediate and developing dangers
- Distinguish between what is certain and what is uncertain in a given situation
- Prioritise actions when time and resources are limited
- Do "what if" risk assessments that take everyone into account, including people with fewer opportunities

* Plan for evacuation and shelter

- Can develop a basic evacuation plan and explain it clearly to others
- Know what makes shelter adequate in different scenarios
- Prepare for likely variations, not only the expected scenario
- Review your plans regularly
- Treat protocols with critical thinking, putting safety first

* Adapt when plans fail

- Treat plan failure as an expected condition rather than an exception
- Adapt using available materials, people and information
- Stay calm enough to think creatively in difficult situations

* Decide under pressure with incomplete information

- Make decisions without waiting for certainty that will not come
- Accept and communicate the limits of what is known
- Revisit and adjust decisions as conditions change, and stay in contact with decision-makers and your organisation

* Apply physical and psychological first aid

- Demonstrate core physical first aid skills relevant to crisis contexts
- Apply the principles of psychological first aid: safety, calm, connectedness, self- and community efficacy, and hope
- Know the difference between providing support and taking over
- Show care by listening, supporting and respecting others' needs

WITH OTHERS

How can I/We act with others under pressure?

Relational capacity

No one responds to a crisis alone. Even when one person is responsible for a decision, preparedness depends on communication, trust, relationships and collective action. The model includes de-escalation, collective action and mutual aid, working across differences and with vulnerable groups, building trust, active listening and clear communication under pressure.

Ask yourself how much you:

*** De-escalate and manage tension**

- Understand what escalation means in a particular context
- Recognise early signs of escalation in a group or situation
- Apply de-escalation approaches and stay grounded enough to be a stabilising presence for others

*** Organise and sustain collective action**

- Distribute roles within a group in ways that match capacity and prevent single points of failure
- Know how to define the role of a leader or leaders
- Mobilise community resources and support community-led action
- Build and maintain peer support structures and mutual aid networks

*** Work across differences and with vulnerable groups**

- Apply cultural sensitivity
- Work with vulnerable groups without speaking for them or reducing them to their vulnerability
- Ask who has a voice in a given situation and who needs to be actively reached

*** Build trust before a crisis arrives**

- Invest in relationships and cultivate trust before it is needed
- Are known by, and know, the people in the community or team you may work with
- Do not expect trust to appear automatically under pressure

*** Listen actively when it is hard to do so**

- Maintain genuine attention to others when under stress
- Do not replace listening with problem-solving or reassurance too quickly
- Notice what is being communicated beyond words

*** Communicate effectively under pressure**

- Keep communication clear, calm, honest and inclusive, even when the situation is chaotic
- Manage the flow of information to prevent rumours without creating information vacuums
- Adapt communication to audience, context and urgency
- Acknowledge all actors involved and keep everyone on the same page throughout the process

**TRUST IS NOT AN
EMERGENCY RESOURCE
THAT APPEARS WHEN
NEEDED. IT IS
SOMETHING WE BUILD
BEFOREHAND.**

IN THE SYSTEM

Do I see and know the bigger picture?

Systemic strategy

Preparedness does not happen in a vacuum. There are communities, governments, NGOs, volunteers, institutions, policies, information systems, resources and histories. There are also different realities. Not every system starts from the same place.

A competence model therefore cannot assume equal access to knowledge, infrastructure, institutional support or crisis experience. This is why the model asks us to think in cycles rather than lines, use contextual and multi-lens thinking, understand early warning and situational awareness, understand the policy and institutional landscape, and hold a dual perspective on facing crises and preparing for them.

Ask yourself how much you:

*** Understand different systems and how they work in practice**

- Understand that systems differ (for example, democratic and non-democratic) and act according to their different dynamics
- Understand how a system really works in practice, not only on paper
- Are aware of global, national and local perspectives
- Know how to protect yourself from a system when necessary

*** Understand the policy and institutional landscape**

- Can describe the key elements of the EU Preparedness Union Strategy and what it means in practice
- Know the roles and responsibilities of different actors: EU institutions, national governments, NGOs, volunteers and communities
- Understand the ESC volunteering context and how it connects to preparedness

*** Think in cycles, not lines**

- Understand the mitigation–preparedness–response–recovery cycle as continuous and overlapping
- Recognise that recovery from one event feeds preparation for the next
- Avoid treating preparedness as a one-time task

*** Use contextual and multi-lens thinking**

- Read complex situations that cannot be captured by single data points
- Consider social, political, cultural and ecological dimensions together
- Question dominant narratives and examine what they make visible and what they obscure

*** Understand early warning and situational awareness based on facts**

- Stay informed through reliable sources without becoming overwhelmed
- Verify sources of information and recognise disinformation and manipulated narratives before acting or sharing
- Translate situational information into relevant local action

* Hold the dual perspective of facing crises and preparing for them
Understand both the civilian experience of crisis and the strategic preparation layer
Keep both perspectives alive simultaneously rather than treating them as separate topics
Apply this dual lens when assessing situations, planning responses and supporting others

A CRUCIAL PRINCIPLE

**CREATING A SHARED
UNDERSTANDING IS ABOUT
BUILDING A COMMON
LANGUAGE WHERE WE
RECOGNISE EACH OTHER'S
DISTINCT EXPERIENCES AND
ACTIVELY LEARN FROM ONE
ANOTHER.**

INTERCULTURAL SENSITIVITY IS PART OF PREPAREDNESS.

**USE IT, CHANGE IT,
ADD TO IT...**



This is not a finished model.

It is a working tool.

You can use it to:

- **Design training programmes**
Choose one dimension and build activities around its guiding question.
- **Reflect individually**
Use the four questions as a personal preparedness check-in.
- **Develop organisational strategy**
Look at what your organisation already has - and where there are gaps.
- **Prepare ESC volunteers**
Use the model before, during and after volunteering experiences.
- **Review crisis procedures**
Don't only ask *"Do we have a plan?"* Ask *"Do we have the competences and relationships to use it?"*
- **Facilitate team reflection**
Ask one question from each quadrant and compare perspectives.
- **Adapt it to your context**
Change the language. Add competences. Remove what does not fit. Translate it. Test it.
- **Apply for the TC on Preparedness;**

Apply for our next Preparedness Lab next year in Korbielow to bring your own perspective.

One skill/knowledge/ attitude I would add/remove:

.....

Because in my context:

.....

I would practise it by:

.....

WALKING FORWARD – WALKING TOGETHER

“Preparedness is not a destination”

At the beginning of this journey, we asked:

What does being prepared mean to you?

Then:

Five days later, the question had not become easier.

It had become bigger. Preparedness is not simply a bag. It is not simply a plan. It is not simply knowing what to do.

It is not simply staying calm. It is not simply knowing the system. It is the **relationship** between all of these things.

- We cannot remove unpredictability.
- We cannot know every crisis in advance.
- We cannot create one strategy that works everywhere.

But

- We can build capacity.
- We can increase awareness.
- We can share knowledge.
- We can practise skills.
- We can strengthen relationships.
- We can learn to read the systems around us.
- And we can make Preparedness something we build **together**.

Remember the Initial questions:

- **Can I stay functional under stress?**
- **Do I know what to do, and how to do it?**
- **Can I act with others under pressure?**
- **Can I see the bigger picture?**

Perhaps preparedness is not about being ready for everything. Perhaps it is about becoming more capable of meeting whatever comes.

- With awareness.
- With knowledge.
- With courage.
- With others.
- And with the willingness to change the plan when the landscape changes.
- We may never have a complete map. But we can carry a compass.
- And we can learn **to walk together**.

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This model was shaped through the experience, questions, challenges and contributions of everyone who participated in the training.

The model was not created because we already knew what preparedness was. It was created because we needed a way to explore the question together.

