

**BRIEF**

**THE ROLE OF  
DIACONAL  
ORGANIZATIONS IN  
ENHANCING  
EUROPE'S CRISIS  
PREPAREDNESS AND  
RESPONSE**

**Eurodiaconia**  *Connecting faith  
and social justice  
through action*

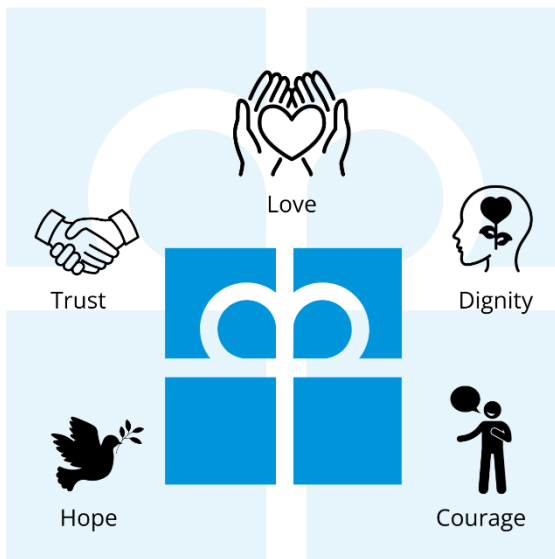
**2024**

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## EURODIACONIA

Eurodiaconia is a European network of churches and Christian NGOs providing social and healthcare services and advocating social justice.

### ORGANISATION VALUES



### MISSION AND VISION

Inspired by our Christian faith, our vision is of a Europe where social injustice is eradicated and each person is valued, included, and empowered to realize their fullest potential, particularly the most vulnerable and marginalized.

Eurodiaconia is a network of churches and Christian organisations that provide social and health care services and advocate for social justice. Together we work for just and transformative social change across Europe.

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## **THE ROLE OF DIACONAL ORGANIZATIONS IN ENHANCING EUROPE'S CRISIS PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE**

Eurodiaconia members (church and Christian based social and health care organizations across Europe) play a critical role in enhancing civilian preparedness and disaster response, and in doing so ensuring social resilience and social cohesion at critical times. Their unique position, deeply rooted in local communities, provides them with unparalleled access and insight into the needs of vulnerable populations during crises. Their recent responses to natural disasters, such as the floodings of September 2024 in central and eastern Europe and November 2024 in Spain highlight the necessity of formally recognizing and integrating diaconal organizations into Europe's preparedness and response strategies.

### **1. COMMUNITY PRESENCE AND TRUST**

One of the defining strengths of diaconal organizations is their deep penetration into local communities, often operating through churches, social centres, and community structures. This widespread presence means they have established relationships with many if not all residents, including those most vulnerable —such as the elderly, migrants, those with limited material means and those with limited language skills. This trusted position allows them to respond swiftly and effectively, especially when official channels might be slower or less accessible. Their intimate knowledge of communities means they can identify and reach out to individuals who might be overlooked by more centralized emergency response mechanisms. For instance, in the Netherlands, Kerk in Actie has introduced a [decentralized food aid system](#) to support people in need. Using their churches across the country as a drop-off point, they can provide food aid to vulnerable people and complement the traditional food banks that can no longer take in the high demand of people in need.

### **2. BRIDGING GAPS IN INFORMATION AND PREPAREDNESS**

A significant challenge in many countries is ensuring that preparedness information reaches all segments of the population. Governments often struggle to communicate effectively with communities, especially with complex technical instructions during emergencies. Diaconal organizations, given their grassroots connections, are uniquely positioned to bridge this gap. They can translate warnings, simplify instructions, and use their established networks to disseminate critical information, ensuring that even the most isolated or vulnerable individuals are prepared.

### 3. COORDINATION AND COLLABORATION

During recent disasters, diaconal organizations such as the Diakonie in Germany have stepped into coordination roles, organizing efforts between civil society, public authorities, and other emergency response organizations. This shows their potential to fill coordination gaps when formal mechanisms are overwhelmed or fragmented. Their ability to convene various stakeholders, including government agencies, NGOs, and local actors, makes them essential in creating an integrated response during emergencies.

For instance, during the September 2024 flooding, Eurodiaconia Hungarian members have played a critical role in crisis response. **Hungarian Interchurch Aid** supported several settlements with high performance pumps, and its volunteers connected with the soldiers, civilians and students in Kismaros, providing food, drinking water, coffee and tea to the workers and taking part in the logistical tasks needed. **The Hungarian Reformed Church Aid (HRCA)** has coordinated a response to the floods resulting from Storm Boris along the Danube River. Volunteers were packing and setting sandbags at designated sites in cities along the Danube, and the HRCA Search and Rescue Team assisted in flood protection by contributing rescue equipment and experts at the most vulnerable sites.

### 4. RESOURCE MOBILIZATION AND FLEXIBILITY

Diaconal organizations have demonstrated a remarkable ability to mobilize resources, both financial and physical, during times of crisis. They often have access to facilities (such as church halls) and equipment that can be repurposed for emergency relief. Additionally, their flexibility allows them to adapt quickly to changing situations, providing tailored support such as financial aid, psychological support, and even technical assistance (e.g. machines for drying houses after floods). This adaptability is crucial in emergency situations, where the needs of affected populations can vary widely.

In the Czech Republic, in response to the floods in September, **the Diaconia ECCB** humanitarian team monitored the extent of damage and needs in the affected households, provided psychosocial assistance and crisis intervention and lent equipment such as dryers, power generators, pumps and small appliances.

## **5. STRENGTHENING PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SPIRITUAL RESILIENCE**

Diaconal organizations provide essential psychological and spiritual support to communities during and after crises, which is often an overlooked aspect of emergency response. Their presence helps maintain a sense of community, offering comfort, guidance, and mental health support that aids in recovery and resilience. For example, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland emphasizes psychological resilience as a key part of its preparedness strategy, providing mental support that complements the physical aid offered during disasters.

## **WHY DIACONAL ORGANIZATIONS SHOULD BE ACTIVELY INVOLVED IN PREPAREDNESS**

### **1. HOLISTIC APPROACH TO PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE**

Diaconal organizations offer a comprehensive approach that goes beyond immediate disaster response to include community-building, education, and long-term resilience. Their work in disaster prevention, capacity building, and climate change adaptation demonstrates that they are not just reactive but proactive in their efforts, which is essential for creating a culture of preparedness.

### **2. ADDRESSING GAPS IN FORMAL SYSTEMS**

In many instances, government responses are limited by bureaucratic constraints, lack of localized knowledge, or communication barriers. Diaconal organizations, with their grassroots networks and localized experience, are well-positioned to address these gaps. As well as formal participating in formal structures their informal yet effective coordination roles during recent disasters have proven that they can act as intermediaries between formal civil protection systems and the communities they serve.

### **3. LEVERAGING ESTABLISHED NETWORKS AND INFRASTRUCTURE**

The existing infrastructure of diaconal organizations—including physical spaces, communication channels, and volunteer networks—offers a ready-made platform for rapid response and preparedness training. This means they can mobilize quickly, often faster than government agencies, and provide essential services such as shelter, food, and psychosocial support.

## 4. ENHANCING SOCIETAL RESILIENCE AND EMPOWERMENT

By fostering connections within communities, diaconal organizations build resilience from the ground up. Academic studies have shown that communities with strong interpersonal connections are more likely to support each other in times of crisis<sup>1</sup>. Diaconal organizations play a pivotal role in nurturing these connections, which is crucial for building societal resilience and ensuring that communities are better prepared to handle future emergencies.

## 5. CONTRIBUTING TO NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN PREPAREDNESS

### STRATEGIES

The involvement of diaconal organizations in national platforms, such as Germany's "National Platform for Resilience," shows their potential to contribute to broader preparedness and resilience strategies. Their inclusion in such frameworks ensures that the perspectives and needs of local communities are represented, making national strategies more effective and inclusive.

### CHALLENGES

Diaconal organizations face several challenges in crisis preparedness and response, which can significantly affect their effectiveness in providing support to vulnerable populations. Here are some key challenges they encounter:

**RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS:** Many diaconal organizations operate on limited budgets and rely heavily on donations and volunteer efforts. This often hinders their ability to invest in necessary training, infrastructure, and resources for effective crisis response. For example, without adequate funding, these organizations may struggle to maintain operational readiness or to scale their response in a crisis situation.

**TRAINING AND CAPACITY BUILDING:** Staff and volunteers may lack the specialized training required for effective crisis management, such as disaster response, mental health support, or emergency logistics. As crises evolve, there is a continuous need for training that adapts to new challenges, including digital tools for communication and service delivery.

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<sup>1</sup> Crisis management: The benefits of social infrastructure and civic ties in uncertain times  
<https://search.informit.org/doi/abs/10.3316/INFORMIT.114438041904182>  
Social Capital's Role in Humanitarian Crises: <https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article-abstract/34/2/1787/5814332>

**RECOGNITION AND INCLUSION IN POLICY FRAMEWORKS:** Diaconal organizations are often not formally recognized as key stakeholders in crisis preparedness and response, which limits their access to funding, training opportunities, and decision-making processes. Their vital role in addressing social cohesion and resilience needs to be acknowledged by public authorities and integrated into national and local emergency plans.

**VULNERABILITY OF TARGET POPULATIONS:** Diaconal organizations often serve the most marginalized and vulnerable groups, who may face barriers to accessing services during crises. This includes people with disabilities, the elderly, and low-income families, people with a migrant background, who may require additional support and tailored approaches. Understanding and addressing these unique needs in crisis planning is essential but can be complex.

**SHIFTING CRISIS LANDSCAPES:** The nature of crises is changing, with an increase in hybrid threats, climate-related disasters, and pandemics. Diaconal organizations must continually adapt their strategies to respond to diverse and evolving challenges. This requires ongoing research, data collection, and evaluation of past interventions to inform future responses.

These challenges highlight the need for stronger support systems, increased funding, and recognition of the essential role diaconal organizations play in crisis preparedness and response. Addressing these issues will enhance their capacity to serve communities effectively during emergencies.

## **LOOKING FORWARD: RECOMMENDATIONS**

Diaconal organizations are uniquely equipped to enhance Europe's civilian and defence preparedness through their deep-rooted community presence, ability to mobilize resources, and focus on holistic resilience. They need support. The European Union can reinforce their ability to deploy and respond to a crisis context through the followings:

> Recognizing and actively involving them in national and European preparedness frameworks is essential for building a more responsive, inclusive, and effective system that can handle the growing challenges posed by natural disasters and other emergencies. Their role in fostering community resilience, providing psychosocial support, and bridging gaps in formal emergency response systems makes them indispensable partners in enhancing Europe's preparedness.

Diaconal organisations, churches and other essential health and social service providers have



proven to be crucial in managing past crises, from the COVID-19 pandemic to climate-related disasters and large-scale migration influxes. Despite being repeatedly mobilised during these emergencies, they often do not receive the recognition or financial support necessary to sustain their work. These organisations need adequate financing for all stages of crisis management: anticipating risks, preparing response plans, issuing alerts, responding in real-time, and ensuring long-term recovery and security.

Regardless of whether they are specialised in immediate crisis response, their deep-rooted presence in communities makes them indispensable for maintaining social cohesion and resilience. Public authorities must recognise diaconal organisations, churches and other essential health and social service providers as key stakeholders and engage them accordingly, providing the resources necessary to strengthen overall crisis preparedness and response systems.

# Eurodiaconia

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