

Executive Summary

Bridging the Gap: Investigating Barriers and Enhancing Resilience in Last-Mile Communities Through Inclusive Early Warning Strategies in Rural Lezha, Albania

Author:

Ita Bonner, Ph.D.(c)

Agricultural University of Tirana, Albania

Research funded by the Global Disaster Preparedness Center of the American Red Cross.

Introduction

Natural disasters and climate-related events pose significant risks to last-mile communities in rural Lezha, Albania, a region characterized by overlapping vulnerabilities such as geographic isolation, socio-economic disparities, and insufficient infrastructure. These communities often face heightened challenges due to limited access to timely and comprehensible early warning information, which exacerbates their exposure to hazards and undermines resilience. With the increasing frequency and severity of extreme weather events driven by climate change, this research addresses these critical gaps by investigating barriers to effective disaster preparedness and response.

The primary objective of the study is to identify the barriers preventing rural communities in Lezha from accessing, understanding, and acting on early warning information. The research aims to provide actionable strategies to enhance disaster preparedness and resilience among these last-mile communities.

Methodology

A mixed-method approach was employed, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative stakeholder engagements to provide a comprehensive understanding of the barriers faced by last-mile communities. Data collection involved stratified sampling to ensure representation across three administrative units in Balldren, Shëngjin, and Shënkoll in Lezha County, followed by face-to-face surveys that captured community perspectives and experiences. Additionally, a stakeholder meeting was conducted to validate findings and gather insights from local experts and officials. The analysis integrated thematic exploration of qualitative inputs with statistical examination of survey data, ensuring a robust and nuanced interpretation of results.

Key Findings

Accessing Early Warning Information

- Only 11% of respondents stated that they find early warning information very accessible, while 89% rated it as somewhat accessible or inaccessible. This highlights serious communication challenges, leaving a significant portion of the population unaware of potential natural disasters.
- Unequal access was observed across regions, with respondents from Shënkoll administrative unit facing more difficulties compared to those in Balldren and Shëngjin.
- Television broadcasts (89%) and social media (58%) were the most common sources of early warning information. However, only 5% of respondents received early warning information through text messages, a method often considered more direct and immediate.

Understanding Early Warning Information

- A significant portion of respondents report difficulties in understanding early warning messages. Only 6% of respondents reported excellent understanding, while 46% rated their comprehension as neutral to poor, highlighting a critical gap between the receiving the information and being able to understand it.

- Only 31% found early warning information clearly communicated. Respondents identified technical language and inaccessible formats as key barriers, often making the information difficult to understand.
- Education levels were a key factor in improving comprehension. Individuals with university or postgraduate degrees demonstrated the highest levels of understanding, while those with lower educational attainment faced significant challenges in grasping early warning messages.

Acting on Early Warning Information

- An overwhelming 94% of respondents had not taken any measures to prepare for emergencies despite receiving early warning information, and only 8% felt adequately prepared to respond to disasters.
- Gender differences were minimal, though slightly more women reported feeling prepared compared to men. Overall, low preparedness points to systemic issues in disaster training and community engagement.
- A lack of participation in training exercises was evident, with 70% of respondents never having participated in preparedness drills.

Humanitarian Aspect

- Resilience levels were low, with 84% feeling neutral or not resilient in facing extreme natural events. Employment status was closely linked to perceived resilience, with full-time employed individuals reporting higher resilience levels.
- Just 15% of respondents reported being able to access adequate humanitarian aid during and after emergencies. The majority expressed uncertainty about how to obtain assistance, with more males indicating uncertainty compared to females. These challenges were compounded by poor infrastructure in rural areas, including limited internet access, poor road conditions, and frequent power outages, all of which hindered timely access to early warning information and response capacity.

Implications and Recommendations

Diversified Communication Channels and Simplified Messaging: A combination of television, social media, mobile apps, and printed materials should be used to make early warning information more accessible to all community members. Simplify early

warning messages to ensure clarity and understanding across all demographics. Public authorities, non-profits, and research institutions can support the development of new technologies and communication strategies tailored to local needs.

Targeted Training and Educational Programs: Humanitarian organizations can collaborate with local authorities and educational institutions to prepare targeted and regular training exercises aimed at increasing preparedness and building resilience within communities. These programs should also include wider awareness campaigns led by volunteers to attract community members and emphasize the importance of early warning information. By integrating these activities into community events and school curricula, these efforts can help foster long-term resilience and a culture of preparedness.

Community Engagement: Engage local community members in forming volunteer groups that can help access early warning information for people with limited access to technology. These groups can assist vulnerable individuals during extreme events, support the distribution of relief, and serve as crucial points of contact for their communities, enhancing overall preparedness and response efforts.

Humanitarian Aid and Assistance: Humanitarian and non-profit organizations, in collaboration with public institutions, can enhance humanitarian assistance by establishing gathering points during and after events and improving aid distribution systems in rural areas and last-mile communities. Coordinated support efforts can strengthen resilience by addressing logistical challenges and ensuring timely, equitable delivery of aid.

Conclusion

This research highlights significant barriers faced by last-mile communities in Lezha, Albania, in accessing, understanding, and acting on early warning information. By addressing these gaps through diversified communication channels, targeted training programs, active community engagement, and improved humanitarian support, stakeholders can significantly enhance disaster preparedness and resilience in these vulnerable regions. The findings and recommendations serve as a foundation for developing inclusive strategies that mitigate risks and strengthen the capacity of communities to withstand disasters effectively.

Follow [this link](#) to read the full paper.