

Preparedness and Parallels: Lessons in Crisis Preparedness from Sweden and Latin America

Description

Europe's current geopolitical instability amid Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 has awakened fears of a larger war. The region's growing complacency following decades of stability was largely a product of strong alliances, economic power, and NATO's protective presence. But this period of calm has revealed low levels of crisis response preparedness and military readiness. The conflict in Ukraine now compels European nations to reevaluate preparedness for kinetic conflicts while strengthening government-to-citizen information sharing critical for coordinated crisis response. In today's security environment where irregular warfare tactics increasingly target civilian populations, national preparedness must extend beyond traditional military readiness to include a society's resilience against [hybrid operations](#).

Take the case of Sweden. The handbook ["In Case of Crisis or War"](#) is at the heart of their renewed focus. The [Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency](#) designed this document to help equip citizens with essential knowledge and practical skills for navigating emergencies. Delving into this publication, one can see strategies for fostering national preparedness. Examining this handbook can also illuminate the broader global landscape of crisis communication, drawing parallels with similar initiatives in other countries and regions. Latin America, a region with relative stability, has lacked major conflicts since the [Cenepa War](#) in 1995. But natural disasters are a persistent threat. Non-traditional security challenges also test social resilience and require that populations are prepared to take action in a whole-of-society response. Such a response determines whether a state rises or fails to meet the test. A comparison of Sweden's approach reveals both universal principles and culturally-specific nuances that shape national preparedness in an increasingly uncertain world.

A first step, not a final solution

The Swedish handbook is unique as an informative tool. The handbook provides vision and guidance for crisis response, covering a wide range of potential emergencies. This aligns with the Swedish Government's bill, [Total Defense 2021-2025](#), which identified civil defense as a core component of citizen readiness. The bill acknowledged that Sweden was unprepared to face certain crises, proposing areas to strengthen the civil defense system. This easily accessible guidance aimed to increase individual citizen readiness and self-sufficiency.

The handbook highlights a few of these areas effectively, including an official [emergency warning and information system](#),[•] designated places [to take cover in a shelter or other protective place](#),[•] and the level of protection each provides. It also uniquely focuses on how [foreign powers and others outside Sweden use disinformation, misinformation and propaganda](#).[•] This gives readers useful information for numerous social challenges during emergencies, broadening the scope of information available to civilians beyond how the government would react to a conventional scenario. The scope expands to consider emerging threats that could fall under the umbrella of irregular warfare. Given its scope, the handbook is best understood as a first response to prevailing need. This is a publication for mass dissemination following a long stretch with none.

The capacity of authorities and preparation of populations in times of peace can be a measure of a country's crisis response efficiency. The handbook's examples of voluntary participation in civil defense organizations, blood donation, and CPR courses can be promoted to foster awareness and habitual engagement. Ideally, this continuous process would start in primary education and continue into adulthood. While instilling these practices in adults later is challenging, integrating preparedness into early education and civic routine at the municipality level is critical because they are usually the first entities to actively respond in the field.

However, despite its strengths, the handbook reveals some weaknesses at the granular level. It does not achieve the essential objective of capturing the attention of citizens in basic elements of survival in a crisis. The authors intended the handbook's broad dissemination to a general population. This generality sacrifices focus on practical application. To overcome this, authorities should assume a national standard of preparedness for civilians. This can account for various factors, including the heterogeneous population and differences in access to resources tied up with complex geography. Geography is a critical factor in the Scandinavian countries. These manuals should aim to give practical and narrow examples of what a person could do in response to a crisis.

The handbook provides a key example. It notes that [in the event of serious accidents, crisis, threats of war, or war, warnings may be issued in various ways](#)[•] at the country level. Although the handbook adequately explains the use, meaning, and types of alarms, practical implementation with the civilian population is missing. In other words, this section only addresses what should be done. This limitation also applies to evacuations. While the handbook explains the need to evacuate to safe locations, how to effectively evacuate is missing. Such efforts of this magnitude must be routinely planned, tested, and rehearsed with the population. Preparation can reduce the crisis's impact. If unpracticed, the risk of failing to reach desired effects increases.

The Handbook and Groundwork: Application in Latin America

While Sweden invests in emergency guides, the question remains: how does this translate to genuine citizen readiness, especially when compared with emergency responses in other regions of the world like Latin America? Is a well-crafted handbook enough for all scenarios? This comparison raises critical questions about the effectiveness of preparedness strategies in different contexts. This is particularly relevant when comparing developed countries such as Sweden with lesser ones. Latin America is sometimes considered absent of regional inter-state conflict except in domestic armed conflicts like in [Colombia](#)s. But Latin America routinely experiences destructive natural disasters, forcing governments to adopt strategies to mitigate the harm these events cause.

To test the handbook in Latin America, approaches can be compared among coastal Andean countries including Ecuador, Peru and Chile. These countries perennially face the challenges natural disasters pose due to their geographical location. They are prone to earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, and more. This situation offers real-world scenarios to evaluate citizen preparedness and government emergency systems. Each of these countries share common elements in their approach to emergency response.

First, specialized agencies like [SENAPRED](#) in Chile, [CENEPRED](#) in Peru, and [SNGRE](#) in Ecuador do state-level planning together with interagency coordination and emergency response. These agencies developed risk studies for specific territorial planning through their experience over time. They have learned that understanding geographic diversity, quality of construction, and population characteristics in each area requires unique responses.

Second, each country promotes national preparedness through education, starting at primary school and continuing on afterward. This raises awareness of risks and emergency mitigation measures. Additionally, early warning systems operate through a variety of audiovisual sources such as television, radio, and cell phones, all coupled with an alarm system that government institutions manage in assigned coverage areas. The [continuous drills](#) at the municipal level involve all citizens and are an important part of risk mitigation. In the case of coastal cities, local populations practice identifying assigned routes and assembly areas on higher ground, increasing readiness and implementing new [technologies](#) through these exercises.

Finally, Latin American countries integrate specialists, their armed forces, NGOs and other stakeholders to implement robust response systems. This ensures broad humanitarian assistance capabilities enabling rapid infrastructure reconstruction and effective service delivery during emergencies.

Latin American countries rely heavily on citizen preparedness given resource constraints. This approach emphasizes strong infrastructure, public education, civic engagement, and long-term

investment strategies ensuring government continuity regardless of shifting political agendas. Governments rely on a community-driven, bottom-up approach to responses, underscoring the necessity of [continuous](#) drills and sustained public education to mitigate civilian harm.

Hurricane Helene provides an opportunity to compare how these systems work. Hurricane Helene struck the southeastern United States in 2024, [killing](#) at least 250 people and extensively damaging infrastructure. In 2015, an 8.4 magnitude [earthquake](#) struck Chile. The epicenter was 175 miles north of Chile's capital, Santiago. The aftermath? Just 11 people died, while infrastructure had minor damage. Multiple factors influence disaster outcomes. Things like population density, building codes, and geographic conditions contribute. Chile's decades-long investment in earthquake preparedness, regular drills, and public education likely played a significant role in this stark difference in casualties.

Bridging the gap

Commonalities arise when comparing the responses between some Latin America states and Sweden. Both responses mitigate civilian harm with similar planning, preparedness, and execution, though Sweden's range of challenges is broader and Latin America focuses more narrowly on disaster response.

Both models for disaster mitigation focus on proactive planning that fosters awareness. But Sweden's handbook prioritizes individual self-preparation over Latin America's collective system of support. Regardless, the examples of Sweden and Latin America show that long-term planning can help reduce costs for emergency preparedness. This planning can also produce a population better trained for disaster response and survival regardless of their participation in government or civil defense.

The Swedish and Latin American examples also reduce [reliance](#) on basic services in crisis, if implemented effectively across the population. However, the handbook has its shortcomings. It suggests that the population can contribute to collective preparedness if they can manage on their own [for at least one week](#). Events in Ukraine demonstrate that the uncertainty of future scenarios frustrates one's ability to know when the civilian population will have access to services provided by the state. The magnitude of a given natural disaster and its geographic dispersion can strain basic services even more, potentially leaving isolated populations on their own for survival for weeks or longer.

On the other hand, Latin American countries can glean valuable lessons of war-related crisis preparedness from the handbook. The absence of conflicts in Latin America may indicate a lack of

adequate education and preparation for civilian populations in threats unique to armed conflicts. Relative stability may also dampen proactiveness among Latin American governments. Peace and regional stability can be easily taken for granted. The handbook emphasizes preparing the civilian population for the potential consequences of war. It addresses issues related to irregular warfare as a way to mitigate the effects caused by confusion, fear, and disinformation among Sweden's citizens while promoting social resilience through a [whole-of-society](#) defense.

In this sense, the handbook is a useful document, but it is also limited by its fundamentally reactive approach. Governments must understand that crisis response, regardless of type, is a permanent endeavor requiring regular rehearsal. The current focus on Sweden's civil defense targets a particular group whose mission is to support the work of the Swedish government and its armed forces. This sidelines education and field work with the entire citizenry. Including the latter could reduce the inevitable chaos in such cases. The handbook does promote better coordination of government work, improved allocation of resources, and more realistic future planning for more comprehensive scenarios with context-specific strategies.

A path forward

Sweden's handbook is a valuable tool for disseminating essential crisis response information in an increasingly unstable geopolitical landscape, exemplified by Russia's war in Ukraine. But it also reveals limitations in translating knowledge to practical citizen readiness when compared to Latin American cases. This disparity underscores the critical need for countries to reevaluate their civil defense strategies, moving beyond theoretical frameworks to implement actionable, community-based preparedness plans while including irregular warfare-focused education and practice.

Future research could benefit from exploring community-based approaches and their applicability in the European context. The long-term impact of sustained educational initiatives on crisis response warrants further examination. Additionally, analyzing how war related-crisis response is integrated in countries with low levels of threat in this specific area would be a valuable contribution.

Governments must prioritize and invest in comprehensive, practical, and community-centric preparedness programs. These programs should move beyond mere guides, instead including practical actions at the ground level. Fostering a culture of readiness through continuous education, drills, and robust community engagement can significantly mitigate the impact of future crises, whether natural or man-made.

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Image: Front Cover of the handbook [In Case of Crisis or War](#)•

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