

OPEN RELIEF

NEWSLETTER

Issue #2 | September 2026 | *Community & co-creation edition*

Building the foundations... together

Welcome back to the OPEN RELIEF newsletter. Since our launch, the consortium has been busy laying the groundwork: establishing the Community of Practice in each country, running ten focus groups across all three partners, taking our website and social channels live, and finalising the Communication & Dissemination Strategy. This issue shares what we have built – and, above all, what we heard from the people at the heart of the project.

The Community of Practice takes shape

At the heart of OPEN RELIEF is its Community of Practice (CoP) – a growing, cross-border network connecting creatives and makers, humanitarian and civil-protection actors, mental-health and psychosocial-support providers, local authorities, and community members across Croatia, Greece and Ukraine.

The CoP is far more than a mailing list. Each partner has mapped and begun engaging stakeholders chosen for their direct relevance and lived experience – people able to contribute as co-creators, testers, and future multipliers of the project's results. Growing from its initial core toward 250+ members, the CoP is already doing its most important job: making sure the tools we design respond to real needs, in real contexts.



KNUTD's focus group session

Listening first: focus groups across three countries

How do you design preparedness tools that actually work? You start by listening. As a first step under Work Package 2, between May and August 2026, each partner held focus groups with the most relevant members of its Community of Practice – creatives, humanitarian

professionals, civil-protection actors, community representatives and people with lived experience of crisis.

10 focus groups 105 participants 55 women 3 countries

Across the consortium this amounts to **10 focus groups and 105 participants** – more than the nine groups and 90 participants we had planned. Every group discussed the same questions: what makes their community vulnerable when a crisis hits, which skills are missing, and what OPEN RELIEF should create to help. Partners then brought their findings together in a consolidated cross-country report, which is now the evidence base for the OPEN RELIEF Methodology & Learning Modules (D2.1).

What we heard in Croatia

IM INDUSTRIES – 4 online focus groups, July 2026

4 focus groups 35 participants

IM INDUSTRIES' four online sessions brought together volunteers who helped after the 2020 Zagreb and Petrinja earthquakes, designers, university professors, design students and agronomists from Zagreb and Zadar, Red Cross and military staff, local politicians, and migrant and foreign workers. Together they described a strong culture of solidarity – and the gaps around it:

Top preparedness challenges

1. Weak coordination between citizens and public services – volunteer groups filled urgent gaps after the earthquakes, but with no shared way to verify requests, set priorities or hand over to professionals.
2. Slow recovery – reconstruction after the 2020 earthquakes is still incomplete, with some homes still untouched, and the gap between official and informal information weakens trust.
3. Under-recognised hazards – floods where drains are poorly maintained, summer wildfires, and drought and extreme heat that threaten farming but get little attention.

Top skills gaps

1. Organising volunteers safely: verifying requests, assessing urgency, sharing out tasks and tracking what has been done.
2. Knowing where civic action stops – when and how to hand over to fire, rescue, medical and other professional services.
3. Finding, checking and sharing reliable information across official and informal channels, and in more than one language.

“Most of us had not volunteered before the earthquakes; the crisis changed us.”

Earthquake volunteer, Croatian focus group

The strongest takeaway. Solidarity comes first. After the earthquakes, neighbours organised food, clothing and transport over WhatsApp while the formal response was still getting started. Professional and volunteer firefighters were repeatedly praised as a model of fast, committed and trusted action.

The key inclusion insight. Migrant and foreign workers rely on messaging apps such as Signal and WhatsApp and have little contact with institutions. Tools that assume stable access, formal registration and a single language leave them out – and may collect more personal data than necessary.

What it means for OPEN RELIEF. The goal is not to replace civic solidarity but to give it structure: simple ways to map needs, verify and prioritise requests, match safe tasks to volunteers and hand over to professional services, for every hazard – not only earthquakes. This is the basis of IM INDUSTRIES' Civic Engagement Strategies methodology in D2.1.

What we heard in Ukraine

KNUTD – 3 focus groups (1 in person in Kyiv, 2 online)

3 focus groups 35 participants

KNUTD's sessions brought together people living through the full-scale war: designers and creative professionals, civil-protection and emergency-response professionals, psychologists, social workers, internally displaced people and disability-rights organisations. They have faced missile and drone attacks and long power and heating cuts in temperatures as low as –20°C.

Top preparedness challenges

1. Too few shelters that are genuinely accessible – and many are furnished with makeshift solutions, arranged without asking the people who use them and supplied with no instructions.
2. No clear instructions for different emergencies, and no single trusted standard for what to keep ready for the first 72 hours.
3. Misinformation, and an information vacuum in the first hours when mobile networks and the internet may be down.

Top skills gaps

1. Acting fast in the first hours: protecting yourself and others, including basic and psychological first aid.
2. Deciding quickly whether to evacuate, take shelter or stay in place.
3. Finding and checking reliable information when networks fail or misinformation spreads.

“In a crisis, the main resource is time, and it is always in short supply.”

Focus group participant, Ukraine

The strongest takeaway. Even the conversation about equipment turned out to be about people. Shelter furniture and supplies are often designed, arranged and maintained without consulting the people who use them, so they meet only the basic needs of a “typical” user.

The key inclusion insight. Accessibility cannot be an add-on. “A shelter that a person with a disability cannot reach or use cannot be considered an effective shelter,” one participant said. People with disabilities or reduced mobility, older people and children need to be planned for from the start.

What it means for OPEN RELIEF. Low-cost, repairable and adaptable solutions, designed with their users: transformable furniture, foldable seating or sleeping areas, privacy features,

clear signage and step-by-step instructions, and a better use of limited space. This is the basis of KNUTD's Frugal Innovation methodology in D2.1.

What we heard in Greece

LATRA – 3 focus groups on Lesbos, 35 participants

3 focus groups 35 participants 19 from underrepresented groups 15 women

LATRA's three sessions brought together migrants and refugees, humanitarian and migration professionals, residents with lived experience of earthquakes and wildfires, community representatives and volunteers, healthcare professionals, local authorities and civil-society organisations. Their message was strikingly consistent:

Top preparedness challenges

1. Low community preparedness and rare training or drills – people, and even some frontline staff, don't know how to act in the first hours of an emergency.
2. Confusing, delayed or inaccessible information and weak coordination between authorities, organisations and communities – including language barriers for migrants and refugees.
3. Neglected long-term recovery – rebuilding after events like the 2017 earthquake and the wildfires takes years, yet gets far less planning than the immediate response.

Top skills gaps

1. Reacting and protecting yourself and others in the first hours, including basic first aid.
2. Finding, verifying and clearly sharing reliable information during a crisis – and communicating across languages.
3. Organising and sustaining community support through recovery, and involving residents in preparedness planning.

"When the fire came, we did not wait for anyone. The whole village came together to help."

Focus group participant, Polichnitos, Lesbos

The strongest takeaway. In real emergencies, the first and most trusted responders are usually local volunteers and neighbours, and external services often depend on residents' local knowledge. Community capacity is the backbone of response.

The key inclusion insight. Access to information and trust rely on familiar local intermediaries –community representatives and volunteers – more than on public institutions. Information must reach the most exposed groups (migrants and refugees facing language barriers, older residents, people living alone, remote areas) in plain and multiple languages, with these groups involved in the planning.

What it means for OPEN RELIEF. The clearest direction is practical, community-level preparedness across the whole cycle – before, during and after a crisis, recovery included. That means simple, plain-language and multilingual guides and information kits, backed by lightweight digital tools such as messaging and alerts, regular training and exercises for

residents, volunteers and frontline staff, and stronger local volunteer networks. These insights feed directly into our recommendation for the D2.1 methodology.

Across the three countries

The three settings could hardly be more different – earthquake recovery in Croatia, the war in Ukraine, and wildfires, earthquakes and refugee arrivals on Lesbos – yet participants described the same problems and asked for the same skills.

Shared challenges

1. No clear guidance for the first hours, and drills are rare.
2. Information that arrives late, unclear or in the wrong language.
3. Weak coordination between authorities, organisations and communities.
4. Long-term recovery gets far less attention than the emergency itself.
5. Vulnerable people left behind: older people, people with disabilities or reduced mobility, people living alone, migrants and refugees, children – and even pets.

Shared skills gaps

1. Protecting yourself and others in the first hours, including basic and psychological first aid.
2. Judging a situation and deciding whether to evacuate, take shelter or stay in place.
3. Finding, checking and sharing reliable information – across languages and safely online.
4. Organising community support that lasts through recovery.

Citizens are not passive. In all three countries, neighbours, volunteers and peer networks were the first to act, often with no previous experience. What they lack is not willingness but structure: shared procedures, ways to check information, safety guidance and clear links to professional services. As one participant put it: “One hand cannot clap alone.”

What participants asked us for. Practical, plain-language materials built around real scenarios; preparedness for the whole cycle, recovery included; resources in English, Croatian, Ukrainian and Greek that also work offline; training and simulations open to complete beginners; and clear ways for volunteers and professional services to work together. Their ideas ranged from a modular 72-hour kit – a universal core with personal additions for health, age, disability and climate – to picture-based multilingual information kits, a volunteer coordination tool and shelter furniture that folds into seating or sleeping platforms.

What it means for OPEN RELIEF. These findings became six shared rules for the OPEN RELIEF Methodology & Learning Modules: practical and scenario-based; plain language and visual; covering the whole preparedness cycle; inclusive from the start; multilingual and offline-ready; and built on privacy, dignity and do-no-harm. Each partner has turned them into one methodology and one learning module – more on that in our next issue.

A warm thank you to everyone who gave their time and shared their experience – often of very difficult moments. Your insights are shaping everything OPEN RELIEF creates.

Also underway

- ▶ **We're live online.** Our website, openrelief.site, is now the home for our open resources and news – and, in time, the OPEN RELIEF Toolkit. Follow OPEN RELIEF on Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn (below) for open calls, events and new resources.
- ▶ **Our Communication & Dissemination Strategy is set.** We finalised the first version of the CD Strategy, defining the shared messaging, visual identity and editorial standards – including accessibility and multilingual reach – that guide everything we publish.

What's next?

In the coming months, the OPEN RELIEF team will be working on:

- ▶ **Turning insight into method** – finalising the OPEN RELIEF Methodology & Learning Modules (D2.1), our shared training manual in English, Croatian, Ukrainian and Greek.
- ▶ **Capacity building** – training each other in frugal innovation, civic engagement and inclusive design at our partner capacity-building exchange in Zagreb, Croatia, on 30 September and 1 October.
- ▶ **Meeting in person** – preparing for the first in-person Consortium Meeting in Zagreb, Croatia.
- ▶ **Growing the Community of Practice** – open calls to join are coming soon.

More updates on activities, partnerships, and results will be shared in the next issue. Stay tuned!

What is OPEN RELIEF?

OPEN RELIEF addresses a pressing gap in current emergency preparedness approaches. While Europe is placing increasing attention on 72-hour survival planning, many existing tools remain single-use, difficult to repair, and poorly adapted to the cultural, practical, and emotional needs of the people who rely on them.

Our project responds by placing cultural and creative sector (CCS) professionals at the centre of preparedness innovation, connecting them with humanitarian actors and communities in participatory co-creation processes. Over 24 months, we will:

- ▶ **Co-develop 11 open-source preparedness solutions**, including water filters, modular shelters, repairable tools, and digital guidance resources
- ▶ **Train and engage 150 artists, 100 humanitarian workers, and 300 community members** in humanitarian design, frugal innovation, and crisis literacy
- ▶ **Publish all results as open-source**, freely shareable and locally adaptable, reaching **1,000+ organisations** across Europe and Ukraine
- ▶ **Launch a multilingual awareness campaign** reaching **500,000+ citizens**

Meet the consortium



IM INDUSTRIES | Coordinator | Croatia

Leading project coordination, capacity building, and participatory design residencies for marginalised communities.

KNUTD – Kyiv National University of Technologies and Design

| Beneficiary | Ukraine

Bringing expertise in digital fabrication, engineering design, and frugal innovation from Ukraine's conflict-affected context.



LATRA EE | Beneficiary | Greece

Leading communication, dissemination, and managing hybrid hubs for participatory design with refugees and displaced creatives.

Stay connected

Follow our journey and be the first to hear about open calls, events, and new resources:

Facebook: facebook.com/openrelief1

Instagram: [@open_relief](https://open_relief)

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Website: openrelief.site

Want to receive future newsletters? Share this with colleagues and partners who may be interested in creative preparedness, humanitarian design, and open-source innovation.
