



From Awareness to Belonging: Migrant Inclusion in Türkiye's Disaster Governance

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Abstract

This paper explores how disaster preparedness policies and practices in Istanbul and Türkiye, more broadly, can be reshaped to inclusively address the needs and knowledge of migrants and refugees, particularly Arabic and Persian-speaking communities. Drawing on data from interviews (2022 to 2025), online surveys (2024 and 2025), and a listening workshop conducted (2025), the study traces how experiences of war, displacement, and precarity intersect with disaster vulnerability. It critiques the limited scope of current municipal “afet bilinci” (disaster awareness) programs, which often rely on technical information with minimal cultural or linguistic adaptation. The paper advocates for participatory, neighbourhood-based approaches that recognise migrants' informal networks, gendered caregiving roles, art-focused and emotional landscapes as key assets for resilience. It also highlights the necessity of integrating conflict-related trauma and migration histories into preparedness strategies. By offering practical recommendations and reflections on how social groups (beyond their legal status) can create a sustainable knowledge exchange on disaster resilience, this paper intends to contribute to more equitable and effective disaster governance in demographically diverse urban settings.

Introduction

This paper explores the gaps and potentials of disaster preparedness policies in Istanbul and in Türkiye more broadly. We evaluate how far these policies go to inclusively address the needs and knowledge of migrants and refugees, particularly Arabic and Persian-speaking resident communities. We draw on policy-oriented evaluations and informative material provided by municipalities, grey and academic literature, as well as on data collected from interviews, online surveys, and a listening workshop we conducted in the framework of the Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded “REFRAME. Reframing the Paradigm of Arrival” project, primarily based in the Bartlett Development Planning Unit at University College London (2024-2027).

More specifically, this policy-informed study intends to assess how experiences of war, displacement, and housing precarity intersect with urban risk, disaster-related vulnerability and potential for preparedness—particularly vis-à-vis earthquakes in the context of Istanbul’s seismic history. We acknowledge the limited scope of current municipal “afet bilinci” (*disaster awareness*) programmes, which often rely on technical information with minimal cultural or linguistic adaptation (Carpi, 2025). Based on this study’s findings, we advocate for participatory, neighbourhood-based approaches that recognise and valorise migrants’ informal networks, caregiving and assistance roles, and emotional landscapes as key assets for resilience. We also highlight the necessity of integrating conflict-related trauma and migration histories into preparedness strategies. By offering practical recommendations and reflections on how social groups (beyond their legal status) can create a sustainable knowledge exchange on disaster resilience, we hope to contribute to more equitable and effective disaster governance in demographically diverse urban settings such as the city of Istanbul.

In brief, our preliminary fieldwork findings indicate that migrant and refugee residents would want schools, municipal trainings, and institutional social media accounts to disseminate practical information regarding disaster preparedness in different languages. The findings also support advocacy for enhancing intergroup interaction through diverse activities not necessarily defined by the disaster rubric. Intergroup interaction, indeed, enables migrant and refugee residents to become more knowledgeable about preparedness; this, in turn, can serve as an effective tool of social integration. Currently, policies in Türkiye are still far from reaching an adequate level of effectiveness and outreach.

Dissemination of ‘Disaster Knowledge’ through Social Media

The main institution responsible for managing disasters and recovery in Türkiye is AFAD, the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency, under the Ministry of

Interior. It is the key national authority responsible for disaster preparedness, response, and post-disaster recovery across the country. However, as will be evident, other formal and informal actors play – or should play – a role in enhancing disaster knowledge (Carpi, forthcoming) and preparedness in Istanbul’s municipal districts.

Interviews were conducted with 85 migrant and refugee residents across the Southwestern districts of Istanbul between 2022 and 2025. Between 2024 and 2025, two online surveys gathered the experience of 37 Persian-speaking and 72 Arabic-speaking participants on their coping mechanisms during disaster, both in Istanbul and in their countries of origin, including their views on how disaster-related knowledge can be expanded. In April 2025, the REFRAME team also conducted a Listening Workshop with twenty-five Istanbul residents; these included local and international disaster-focused experts, volunteers, and migrant women and men from Iran, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria. The team found that residents would like to see social media reporting disaster-related information more systematically. Municipal social media accounts (accounts that are managed by Istanbul city’s municipalities) are active yet not always updated daily, especially when it comes to sharing direct and tangible information on public emergencies and training opportunities available for local residents. A short review conducted by the authors shows that these outlets often address only Turkish “citizens”, rather than “residents”, revealing non-inclusive language in official communications. In other cases, these communications are generically addressed to “households”, with scarce emphasis on the social groups these are formed by and possible individuals with migrant background (Çakı and Uzun, 2023). Moreover, the team identified two main limitations: firstly, disaster-related information is usually circulated during crisis, rather than earlier, with a focus on preparedness. Secondly, there is no translation service provided by local authorities, except for informal support that is often offered by family members and friends who have a higher command of the Turkish language, especially younger generations. One of the authors of this paper, who worked with the Akdem Municipality in the past, reports that she and her team organised online seminars on virus prevention in Arabic, Persian and Turkish during the Covid-19 pandemic. The training had been advertised through municipal social media too. However, this information was never translated into a written form and collated into official documentation.

In Türkiye, civil society initiatives have been reported to be particularly effective in areas historically marginalised by the central government, such as the Kurdish majority region. Here, civil society members have actively circulated disaster-related information in other existing languages through social media accounts, like in the case of Diyarbakir after the February 2023 earthquakes. In these contexts, the role of social media becomes even more paramount.

Local and international media are important in shaping collective memory. They play a key role in turning disasters into knowledge, conveying and questioning details, and offering a space for public discussions (Aldeman and Abdul Jaleel, 2024). Social media, more precisely, are believed to be very effective in preserving and catalysing collective memory (Gülüm, 2024). The latter is paramount for supporting disaster-affected societies in facing the physical damage and the overall impact of such events, and in processing disasters both at an individual and a collective level.

What type of Institutional Disaster Preparedness is already in place for Migrants and Refugees?

Our research findings indicate that most residents, regardless of their background, want effective, institutionalised forms of disaster preparedness, rather than disaster communication strategies based on word-of-mouth and the informal exchanges of knowledge that are already in place. Indeed, many of our interviewees are long-term migrants: in particular, they are already experienced in finding accommodation and moving within Türkiye and within the Istanbul metropolitan area. As showed in a recent study from one of the authors (Carpi et al., 2024), these migrant and refugee groups are likely to have basic knowledge of earthquakes but do not know the practicalities of creating sustainable forms of preparedness, including where to seek shelter at the onset of an earthquake; what construction materials should be avoided when selecting a place to live; or what building level is safer to occupy in a city subjected to disaster-risk.

Due to new legislation released on 04.9.2023 and decreed by the Turkish Ministry of the Interior, all municipalities (regardless of their scale) are urged to assemble a Directory of Disaster Management. After the especially severe 2023 earthquakes in the Southeastern region of Türkiye, these institutions now organise a larger number of gatherings and informative sessions for the general public. Nonetheless, most of these sessions focus on post-earthquake issues rather than prevention and risk mitigation, despite the concept of “disaster preparedness” being a continuum that includes mitigation, response, recovery, and rehabilitation (Alexander, 2000), due to the interconnectedness of disaster phases.

Educational sessions¹ are organised by the municipal authorities with the aim of establishing expert teams comprised of local volunteers. Typically, local authorities in earthquake-prone regions identify emergency gathering areas and promote them to the public through street signs, mobile texts, and, as mentioned, social media accounts. However, translation into other languages, even for basic information, is not guaranteed and still occurs on an *ad hoc* basis: only a small number of municipalities

¹ See, for example, <https://www.karsiyaka.bel.tr/karsiyaka-mahalle-afet-gonulluleri-ni-ariyor>

provide disaster preparedness material in languages other than Turkish. Some of these municipalities implement refugee-oriented projects when supported by the Turkish and/or international authorities; policy documents produced through these projects are generally prepared by the civic organisations that cooperate with local authorities, such as İnsan Hak ve Hürriyetleri ve İnsani Yardım Vakfı (IHH) and Uluslararası Mavi Hilal İnsani Yardım ve Kalkınma Vakfı (IBC).² Thus, having essential written information in a language other than Turkish, including English, is uncommon. Similarly, developing sufficient awareness of safe and suitable construction materials for earthquake resilience is possible, but it requires individuals to gather the needed information and train themselves, due to the information on construction materials being mostly disseminated through word-of-mouth, rather than through systematic and institutional ways.

Nonetheless, if someone is a registered migrant and regularly resides at their registered address, they can request a building check-up for earthquake resilience from the relevant metropolitan municipality. The vulnerable circumstances in which migrants and refugees look for accommodation in Istanbul (e.g., social discrimination and lack of access to low-cost housing due to their legal and often undocumented status, as identified by Carpi et al., 2024) enable only a small number to inquire about building safety, as fear of homelessness deprioritises housing-related concerns vis-à-vis future disasters. As evidence of a lack of migrant and refugee-focused awareness in disaster, the Istanbul Regional Plan (2024–2028) targets resilience for “all Istanbul residents” without specific migrant strategies. Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality’s - namely İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi (İBB) - equality and strategic plans touch on migrants’ needs during crises but do not constitute a dedicated migrant-inclusive disaster plan.

However, in the aftermath of the 2023 earthquakes, there has been growing awareness of the need to address, include and learn from foreign migrants and refugees in disaster preparedness programmes. In 2025, the Directorate General of Migration Management in Sakarya organised an earthquake preparedness training specifically set up for foreigners. The office stated that such training would be rolled out regularly, while explicitly mentioning refugees and migrants as one of the vulnerable local groups (whose preparedness and living conditions need targeted assessment). The number of programmes and consultations with migrant groups on these topics is also on the rise, and public acknowledgement³ of the unequal access

² These can be translated respectively as the “Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief” (IHH) and the “International Blue Crescent Relief and Development Foundation” (IBC).

³ An example of municipal consultation can be viewed here: <https://ibb.istanbul/tum-hizmetler/bilgi-hizmetleri/yerel-esitlik-eylem-planlari/>

of migrants to the health system, housing, and education is similarly growing.⁴ This evidences an extremely slow yet existing progress towards a rights-based approach to disaster planning.

What are Istanbul-based Schools presently doing to include Migrants in Disaster Governance?

Overall, our interviewees have largely mentioned schools as a space of encounter with other groups and of possible collective training sessions. AKOM (Afet Koordinasyon Merkezi), a disaster coordination centre in Istanbul, conducts disaster preparedness training for school children. Notwithstanding, these sessions are entirely held in Turkish with the support of visual materials. Since the training is provided to all students, migrant children who are officially enrolled in schools are also trained. "Depremden Korunma ve Güvenli Yaşam Eğitimleri" (Earthquake Protection and Safe Living Training) is held annually in a similar vein: this encompasses the use of visual materials and virtual reality simulations. However, the AKOM website⁵ does not mention any distinction between citizens and non-citizens in the delivery of content and instructions, and it does not demonstrate awareness of how different social groups may or may not be able to access services and information (see Carpi et al., 2024).

In school training materials, learning from the past and building up national disaster memory has been a key tool utilised by both civil society organisations and the governing bodies in Türkiye. Since the catastrophic earthquake of 1999 in Gölcük, Izmit, collective earthquake memory has been constantly reshaped, increasing the social understanding of disaster preparedness, despite its restrictiveness (Aldamen and Abdul Jaleel, 2024). The 1999 earthquake remains the main lesson for highlighting best and bad practices during, before, and after a disaster, considering the low capacity of local governments and the lack of public disaster awareness.

Are other Forms of Intergroup Mingling able to Foster Disaster Preparedness as a Process of Knowledge Exchange?

People desire spaces for inter-group mingling, which takes place but is not encouraged, as opportunities are provided rarely (both face-to-face and online). While local authorities do not encourage inter-group encounters, they do not hinder them either, unless they take on an overt political form that can have implications for Turkish foreign or domestic politics. Over the last five years, the Zeytinburnu and Esenyurt municipalities offered spaces to host such intergroup activities, which one of the

⁴ The following is an example from 2021 of consultation plan with migrants, focused on healthcare, education, and housing: <https://sehirplanlama.ibb.istanbul/beyoglu-ilcesi-sivil-toplum-toplantilari/#toggle-id-6>.

⁵ The website of the disaster coordination center AKOM can be viewed here: <https://akom.ibb.istanbul/>

authors of this paper helped to organise. In fact, the local demography of these municipalities is largely composed of Persian-speaking migrants and refugees who have an interest in attending these meetings. In essence, these intergroup activities, started by local associations in which refugee groups participate,⁶ were mainly meant to provide information to refugees and asylum seekers regarding children's rights, formal regulations and national laws on detention and deportation, access to services and aid, international protection or temporary protection, child marriage and gender-based violence while in Türkiye. Prior to the 2023 earthquakes, few of these activities were explicitly focused on disasters. Many of them revolved around livelihoods and professional skills development to make individuals employable; sewing workshops, for example, were open to all migrants and refugees in Zeytinburnu regardless of their legal status. Our interviewees confirmed that most of the trainees were Syrian and Afghan, with some holding Turkish citizenship.

Our findings also indicate that other meaningful experiences and realities of intergroup mingling in Istanbul are small-scale spaces, both formal and informal, that offer music and dance. These include Hubban, aimed at connecting urban planners and migrant artists,⁷ which was recently established under the institutional protection of Urban Koop and co-founded by Onur Atay. Echoing some existing literature on post-earthquake settings (Yılma Şakalar and Yurdalan, 2024), our preliminary findings show that music and dance venues are important spaces for intergroup knowledge exchange at a very broad level, also in light of the recent 6.2 magnitude earthquake in Istanbul that occurred in April 2025.⁸ In these spaces, migrant and refugee groups are able to meet freely and use the available infrastructure for any form of exchange. In this framework, the REFRAME team has the purpose of identifying how such exchanges can be made meaningful in terms of disaster knowledge expansion across local society, mutual knowledge across groups, as well as an increased participation of migrants and refugees in Istanbul's urban life and safety plans vis-à-vis precarity and vulnerability more widely.

In this context, there are also institutional programmes designed by municipalities, governorates and AFAD⁹ to provide educational support to the *muhtarlar*, namely, local state officials. According to our research participants, sampled across Persian and Arabic-speaking groups in Istanbul and mostly not holding Turkish citizenship, *muhtarlar* are the only figures who, in the capacity of formal representatives of residential communities and administrative leaders of metropolitan neighbourhoods or villages, have experience in sharing formal and informal data and practical knowledge

⁶ A significative example is SADA, a local women association: <https://sgdd.org.tr/sadanin-oykusu/>

⁷ See the official website here: <https://www.hubban.net/>

⁸ The news can be accessed here: <https://www.bbc.com/news/live/cm2yly2j4k9t>.

⁹ For instance, in Mersin: <https://www.mersin.bel.tr/haber/buyuksehirde-muhtarlara-yonelik-afet-farkindalik-egitimi-1730787574>, and Istanbul: <https://www.konaklarmuhtarligi.com/post/afad-il-mudurlugu-muhtar-egitim-programi>

regarding disaster preparedness. In this regard, migrant and/or refugee community leaders – who normally play an informal role in the resettlement society – are not included in any way in municipal disaster education programmes. Capitalising on their leading role within these social groups may be strategically useful to enhance disaster knowledge, communication and preparedness throughout local society.

Conclusion

Although the Turkish Ministry of Health declared that 2021 was the Year of Disaster Education, and that the goal was to reach 51 million people with disaster knowledge through translated material, key information on non-citizens' way of living vis-à-vis disaster preparedness is still insufficient. The official documentation produced by the Turkish Government, who supervises the coordination of the annual central budget, states that "inclusive mechanisms should be developed to increase the participation of refugee and migrant communities in disaster management processes" (T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Strateji ve Bütçe Başkanlığı, 2025: 57). In addition to that, "culturally sensitive communication channels should be established, community focal points should be appointed, and emergency planning materials should be made accessible in relevant languages" (Ibidem). All of this sounds promising, yet progress towards an effective participatory disaster management remains slow. Effective disaster governance requires input from all affected groups, not just citizens or permanent residents. Migrants, especially refugees, are excluded from both decision-making and knowledge dissemination processes, despite some of them being among the most affected in the majority of disasters. As already evidenced in a previous study, large segments of Istanbul-based migrants and refugees remain especially vulnerable during disasters as they are the most likely to lack access to safe housing and disaster preparedness materials in their language, and to be subjected to social discrimination and legal precarity that directly impinge on their capacity to find shelter and local support promptly (Carpi et al., 2024). Setting up inclusive mechanisms (e.g., platforms meant to enhance intergroup dialogue, community committees, migrant representation in planning bodies, and culturally appropriate consultation processes at different scales) is essential to enhance participation. Disaster governance needs to become cognizant of and responsive to group-based histories, capacities and challenges; else, no success can ever be claimed for disaster preparedness, recovery, and overall societal safety.

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