



CREWS

Anna-Maria Axelsson: Civil preparedness starts with what we do every day as ordinary citizens

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Photo: Anna-Maria Axelsson, Head of the Civil Defence League, Sweden

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Below are the key insights shared in our conversation with **Anna-Maria Axelsson**.

“Civil preparedness and everyday culture are the foundations of resilience. When you begin with small steps together with citizens, you can create significant change.”

How did you begin working in the Swedish Civil Defence League, and what motivated you to stay?

I first came into contact with the organisation when I attended a CPR course offered by a local association. I wanted to learn more and became a volunteer in my community, ready to assist

whenever needed. Later, when we moved from the city to a small village next to one of Sweden's highest-risk rivers, I wanted to learn how to protect my home from flooding and realised I could pass that knowledge on to others.

I continued learning and teaching, and soon understood that I could contribute best by becoming a skilled instructor able to reach more people. This motivation eventually led me to participate in developing our national training programmes. I began at the local level, moved to the regional level, and later to the national level, gaining practical experience from real events and flood work, and learning how to communicate effectively with the public.

What are the core values of the Civil Defence League?

The core value is a **self-protection approach** that places the citizen at the centre. This principle guides all our courses and assignments—whether we teach first aid, support municipalities in organising water distribution, or train people in week-long home preparedness.

Basic needs such as food, water and reliable information have not changed; only the channels through which we receive them have evolved. When people can meet their own home-preparedness needs, they can also help others, creating a continuous chain of resilience. This principle is fundamental to Sweden's total defence system. Every person matters, and our organisation helps citizens understand how to put this into practice.

In Latvia, we speak about 72-hour preparedness. You emphasise a full week. Why?

We worked with the Swedish government on a national campaign that originally introduced the 72-hour model. Today, it has been extended to **seven days**. The earlier campaign was large and successful, and the updated timeline now applies nationally.

A week of preparedness provides a greater sense of control, reduces anxiety, and enables people to support their neighbours more confidently.

Who do you teach—do people approach you, or do you reach out?

Both. Many local associations invite us to conduct training, and we also organise open sessions. When we work to build volunteer capacity, we do so directly with municipalities. Together, we run recruitment campaigns and information events.

What does it take to be prepared for seven days?

Preparedness is based on covering **basic needs**: food, water, information, heat, and safety at home. What this entails depends on where you live and the resources around you.

In a city apartment, you may need bottled water. The exact amount depends on the size of your household and whether you have pets. In the countryside, if you have your own well, storing bottled water may not be necessary. If you have firewood, you may not need additional heating equipment.

Preparedness should always be adapted to your personal situation. It should not be made more complicated than necessary.

Cooperation is equally important. One of the first things you should do in an apartment building is get to know your neighbours. You can share responsibilities—for example, one household may store a radio and take responsibility for receiving information. Collective planning is more affordable and more effective than acting alone.

You are never strongest alone; you are strongest when you work with your neighbours.

Individualism is common. Many do not consider sharing resources such as a radio.

It was similar in Sweden initially. Since 1937, authorities have emphasised that preparedness is not an individual task. Total defence requires cooperation. Your actions affect others.

Sweden also has a civic duty within total defence, meaning that acting alone contradicts the system. Understanding one's responsibility and working together is essential.

Has interest in your training changed in recent years?

Interest increased significantly after the start of the war in Ukraine. Many people wanted to join our training programmes or municipal volunteer groups. Managing these numbers has been challenging, especially because expectations were often based on systems that no longer exist, such as former territorial defence units.

We now work to bridge knowledge gaps and guide volunteers into the current structures. At the same time, discussions have begun about reintroducing certain earlier functions, such as shelter management, though decisions are still pending.

How do you view “prepper culture,” which emphasises individual survival?

Prepper culture often reflects a lack of trust in society. Sweden traditionally has high levels of social trust, but this cannot be taken for granted. Across the Baltic Sea region, trust levels differ widely. Building trust is fundamental for strong total defence.

In disaster situations, elderly people are often seen as vulnerable. Yet they also hold essential knowledge.

Older adults living at home often have the strongest preparedness. They shop less frequently, rely on long-term supplies, and possess practical skills many younger people have lost—repairing clothes, maintaining household items, preserving food, and managing heat.

Interestingly, young people increasingly want to learn these traditional skills. Much of the most valuable preparedness knowledge lies in older generations.

How can culture and tradition support preparedness?

Cultural and traditional practices are powerful. They act as social “glue.” If we speak only about preparedness or war, we will not reach people. But if we begin with cultural and community activities, togetherness grows—and preparedness follows.

Across Sweden, and especially in Ukraine, we see how cultural and artistic traditions provide meaning. Without meaning, people lack motivation to protect anything.