VUELCO: Volcanic Unrest in Europe and Latin America
2nd WORKSHOP
"Scientific advice, decision-making, risk communication"
7th – 8th November 2013

SESSION 3- *"RISK COMMUNICATION: Building a risk aware and prepared community"*

Synthesis and best-practices retrieved

One of the goals of the 2nd VUELCO workshop titled "Scientific advice, decision-making, risk communication", organized by the Italian Department of Civil Protection on 7th - 8th November 2013, was to focus on the most potential best practices in risk communication field.

Three highly experienced people, coming from different countries and fields of activity, were called on the stage to bring up to the audience their experiences on the matter: Prof. Edoardo Cosenza (councilor for civil protection of Campania Region), Prof. Ryerson Christie (lecturer at the School of Sociology of University of Bristol) and Dr. Marco Cattaneo (editor in chief at "National Geographic Italy" and at "Le Scienze"). The session was chaired by Dr. Titti Postiglione (director of Communication Office at the Department of Civil Protection).

Through the presentations and the following discussions, thanks to different backgrounds and approaches, some valuable worthy to note themes arose.

Communication is not a one-way process and is not a plain indoctrination rather, indeed, an exchange based on an active listening and dialogue within a bidirectional process. A successful communication requires the establishment of a common ground between two people-understanding.

Before briefing people on the potential hazards they could come across in case of volcanic unrest, it is important to know why they live in a dangerous area and check the community perception of their daily threats, as well as the confidence they have on the disaster response system. The listener observing people's behavior and body language, will develop a more accurate understanding of their message and background, feeling how they perceive insecurity for their lives, hence being geared to conceptualize the volcanic hazard with them. Going house to house making interviews and asking people what they see as a threat for their daily lives, is therefore fundamental.

Another key point in risk communication is to make sure that advice and rules of behavior released go along with the local common sense and traditions (when not completely wrong).

Only the above mentioned approach allow to win the trust of people, that is the real essential point of an effective communication, much more than impart scientific concepts.
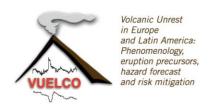
Communicating is a profession, thus communication must be entrusted to experts. A good researcher, an excellent scientist or a disaster manager, cannot be automatically an effective communicator. There is the need to take advantage of communication experts as permanent partners, on a par with the scientific community, to "translate" scientifically perfect answers and impeccable risk assessments into a general acknowledged language.

Moreover, the institution of a "Science Media Centre" on the British model, could be of great help in disseminating correct information among journalists. It should act as a central coordination point on key issues, being a unique point of reference to promote, not only in case of disasters, more informed science in the media. Its main function would be a service to journalists, providing background briefings on current scientific issues and facilitating interviews with scientists. At the same time, it would provide advice and support to scientists in engaging with the media.

In order to have a high level of trust in risk management, it is important that citizens "get used" to the individuals which are protecting them. There is thus the need to create a permanent active scientific communication culture; the present habit of talking about risks only during ongoing emergencies, doesn't help people in trusting the system/institutions.

Peacetime is the right moment to effectively educate and to strengthen relationships between citizens and institutions. An aware and well trained citizen will ordinarily adopt risk reduction countermeasures in case of emergencies and will help in containing disaster effects.

In the end, the involvement of local communities should be taken into account not only in view of risk communication, but also when drawing emergency plans or mitigation measures. Each decision related to these aspects should be also shared with local authorities.