

Summary

The growing cost and frequency of natural catastrophes and their implications for economic growth and development have led to a concern over the level of public awareness and education relative to large-scale catastrophes and disaster risk reduction measures. Public awareness and education of disaster risk reduction are, in particular, increasingly acknowledged as important components of effective risk management of natural catastrophes. The financial component of disaster risk management and mitigation strategies, involving risk transfer and compensation strategies, is also recognised as being important for reducing the financial impact of catastrophes on individuals, businesses, and governments, and permitting more rapid economic and social recovery. As such, systematic promotion of public awareness and education of risks and risk reduction measures, including financial loss-sharing and risk transfer tools, is an important aspect of national and international strategies to reduce vulnerability and losses from catastrophic events.

It is recognised in many OECD and non-OECD countries that public awareness and education of natural catastrophe risks must be enhanced. Ongoing education, development, and implementation of related risk reduction measures should be supported. Given the increasing impact of human activity on the scale and costs of catastrophes triggered by natural hazards, these efforts are important for reducing the physical, economic, and social costs of natural catastrophes. In some cases, measures can also help to prevent their occurrence. Risk awareness and education efforts must also take place at every level of society – at the individual, business, civil society, and government levels. Effective and efficient risk mitigation strategies are often beyond the means and control of individuals and must be undertaken by a wide range of players, including governments, industry, educational institutions, the civic sector, and other stakeholders.

In recognition of the importance of public awareness and education of natural catastrophe risks and risk reduction measures for the effective management of large-scale disasters, the OECD commissioned a stocktaking of selected country efforts to raise public awareness and education of the impact of natural hazards and to enhance awareness and education regarding risk mitigation measures, including financial coverage and protection. The stocktaking covered the public, education, private and civic sectors of 13 selected OECD and emerging economy countries. Hazard-prone OECD countries were selected for the stocktaking, including Iceland, Italy, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Portugal, Turkey and the United States. Less hazard-prone countries were added for comparison purposes, including the United Kingdom, Spain and Canada. Finally, the two largest emerging economies outside the OECD, namely China and India, were included both for their population size and the diversity of the hazards that each face.

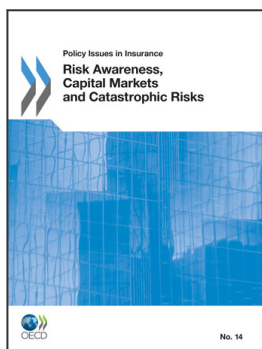
All of the countries surveyed had some risk awareness and preparedness information that is distributed or made available to the general public by civil defence or other ministries. Memorials and museums located at past disaster sites, hazard resistant construction seminars and materials, and mock evacuations and disaster drills were also

present in many countries. Some countries have risk education in their national curriculum, while others have developed voluntary programs for risk awareness and risk reduction education in the schools. Some insurance companies and consortiums are directly targeting the public with mass marketing campaigns and information dissemination. There are also examples of large corporations providing or funding risk reduction education for the general public and their employees. Within the growing global awareness of the importance of community risk reduction, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and many national civic organisations have also recently begun to include risk reduction education as part of their strategies. The United Nations, through its International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR), has been active in internationally promoting better awareness and education of disaster risks and especially disaster risk reduction strategies. International efforts have focused on increasing awareness of national governments and policy makers regarding the risks facing their country and the ways they can reduce catastrophic losses.

Despite the presence of risk awareness and risk reduction education in many countries, there remains significant scope for enhancement. Many government-sponsored and civil society programs continue to put heavy emphasis on emergency response and citizen response-preparedness. While important, this focus often fails to emphasise the individual and collective actions that can be taken prior to a disaster and may even promote a sense of public helplessness. As evidenced in this stocktaking, a re-direction of focus from response to preparedness, risk reduction and financial protection is occurring, although the change is often slow.

Awareness and education efforts in all sectors could be improved by promoting land use planning, building codes, and insurance schemes as a means of minimising or spreading risk. Furthermore, most countries assessed do not include risk awareness or risk reduction education as a fully-integrated part of school education. While innovative education exists for school age children and their families, it is often implemented in an ad hoc and voluntary way, reducing its impact. Within the private sector, insurance and financial education programs may benefit clients by including or further emphasising risk awareness and natural catastrophe insurance education. Regardless of target group or sector of origin, all risk awareness and risk reduction education programs should seek to be tailored to the particular hazards, vulnerabilities and capacities of its citizens, and improved through evidence-based monitoring and evaluation.

This initial stocktaking suggests that promoting awareness and education of natural catastrophe risks and, in particular, risk reduction measures can encourage voluntary risk reduction activities, including such key measures as safe construction, retrofitting and household preparedness. As part of a broad national risk reduction strategy, it can also strengthen public support for compulsory risk reduction measures such as land use planning, building codes, environmental stewardship and, where applicable, insurance schemes. Raising public awareness regarding natural catastrophic risk and risk reduction strategies is a key component in the promotion of a culture of safety within a nation's borders and beyond. Risk awareness and risk reduction education is a foundation and pre-requisite for effective catastrophic risk management and disaster risk reduction.



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