Trends in communicating risks

Risk communication is fundamental to governments' risk management strategies that aim to reduce future losses and damages from disasters. It increases awareness in households, businesses and communities about exposure to hazards and specific vulnerabilities, and informs what prevention, mitigation and preparation measures to take. Public debates on investments in these measures are thus better informed.

The OECD Survey on Risk Communication Policies and Practices (2015) shows that national governments take the lead in risk communication, though in 15 OECD countries (and Colombia) this function is shared with sub-national governments. The private sector plays a risk communication role in some countries, in supplying scientific information for underlying analysis, and in broadcasting and publishing risks to the public. The private sector also shares information with public authorities and the public when accidents related to its activities might pose a hazard, such as industrial or nuclear power accidents. This survey shows that the private sector has a formal role in risk communication in only 9 OECD responding countries.

The basic responsibility of governments to provide public safety and security is fostered by effective risk communication that engages the whole of society. The OECD Survey on the Governance of Critical Risks (2016) shows that 31 OECD countries follow such an approach. It shows that 29 countries provide information to the public in advance of imminent major hazards about protective measures to take, and 27 countries attempt to stimulate investment in self-protective and resilience-building measures by communicating information about risks.

The use of two-way communication channels between message providers and message receivers is shown to promote effective risk communication. It enables individuals to provide governments with more granular information about risks to different communities and stakeholder groups, and to recalibrate their risk management decisions accordingly. This in turn enhances trust in government and the credibility of its policies. Evidence from the 2016 survey shows that across OECD countries two-way communication lines are well established, with 20 responding countries providing platforms for two-way risk communication with stakeholders. Moreover, evidence from the 2015 survey shows that 12 responding countries have enacted feedback or interaction mechanisms from citizens to their government. Social media is a powerful channel to foster dialogue on risks, for example by creating interactive electronic platforms.

Effective risk communication adapts to specific population groups and is tailored to specific risk management needs of different demographics and societal contexts. For example, elderly people may have physical constraints to react to and change their behaviour when faced with imminent emergencies. Risk communication aimed at school children should be delivered differently than to adults. Countries have made significant efforts to tailor risk communication practices to specific groups. The 2016 survey shows that

more than half of OECD countries (24 countries) conduct targeted communication to vulnerable population groups.

Policy evaluation of the influence that risk communication has on behaviour is important to discern whether the desired objectives were achieved, and to glean lessons for future improvements in policy design. Although 11 OECD countries have attempted to assess impacts of their risk communication efforts, few reported concrete results.

Methodology and definitions

The data used are based on the OECD Survey on the Governance of Critical Risks (2016) and the OECD Survey on Risk Communication Policies and Practices (2015), both of which were carried out among OECD countries and OECD accession countries (Colombia and Costa Rica). Respondents to the surveys were predominantely officials in central government departments.

Risk communication is the exchange of information about the exposure of populations and assets to a hazard. The goal is to maintain or improve risk understanding, affect risk perception and/or equip individuals or groups to act appropriately in response to an identified risk.

Two-way communication is a form of communicating information in which both parties involved transmit information one to the other.

More detailed data on the actors with legal or formal responsibility for risk communication are accessible online (see Annex F).

Further reading

OECD (2016), "Trends in Risk Communication Policies and Practices", OECD Publishing, Paris, *http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264260467-en*.

OECD (2014), "OECD Recommendation on the Governance of Critical Risks", OECD, Paris, *http://www.oecd.org/gov/risk/Critical-Risks-Recommendation.pdf*.

Figure notes

12.8: Not applicable refers to countries that responded "Yes" to the question, "Does your government encourage a whole of society approach to risk communication?".

12.9: Not applicable refers to countries that did not provide a response to the question, "Are there feedback or interaction mechanisms from citizens to the government?" or that responded "Don't know".

12.10: Not applicable refers to countries that did not provide a response to the question, "Are there any studies to assess the impact of risk communication in your country?" or that responded "Don't know".

Information on data for Israel: *http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932315602*.

12.8. Aims of central/federal risk communication strategies that encourage a whole-of-society approach to risk communication, 2016

	Foster inclusiveness		Encourage self-protective measures		Promote two-way communication	
	Targeted communication to vulnerable population groups	Promote household resilience measures through the public education system	Information to stimulate investment in self-protective and resilience-building measures	Information to the public in advance of imminent major hazards about protective measures to take	Fora in support of debate on the need for prevention	Platforms for two-way risk communication with stakeholders
Australia	○	○	●	●	●	●
Austria	○	●	●	●	●	●
Canada	●	○	●	●	●	●
Chile	●	●	●	●	○	○
Denmark	○	○	●	○	○	●
Estonia	○	○	○	●	●	○
Finland	●	●	●	●	●	●
France	●	●	●	●	●	●
Germany	●	●	●	○	○	○
Greece	○	○	●	●	○	●
Iceland	●	○	●	●	○	●
Ireland	●	●	●	●	○	○
Israel	●	●	●	●	○	○
Italy	●	●	●	●	●	●
Japan	●	●	●	●	○	●
Korea	●	●	●	●	●	●
Latvia	●	●	○	●	○	●
Luxembourg	●	○	○	●	○	○
Mexico	●	●	●	●	●	●
Netherlands	●	●	●	●	●	●
New Zealand	●	●	●	●	●	●
Norway	●	○	●	●	○	○
Poland	x	x	x	x	x	x
Portugal	○	●	○	●	○	○
Slovak Republic	○	●	●	●	○	●
Slovenia	●	●	●	●	○	○
Spain	●	●	●	●	●	○
Sweden	●	●	●	●	●	●
Switzerland	●	●	●	●	●	●
Turkey	●	●	●	●	○	○
United Kingdom	●	○	●	●	●	●
United States	●	●	●	●	●	●
Total OECD						
● Yes	24	22	27	29	16	20
○ No	7	9	4	2	16	12
x Not applicable	1	1	1	1	1	1
Colombia	●	○	●	●	●	●
Costa Rica	●	●	●	●	●	●
Lithuania	●	●	●	●	○	●

Source: OECD (2016), Survey on the Governance of Critical Risks, OECD, Paris.

StatLink http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933535411

12.9. Feedback and interaction mechanisms from citizens to the government, 2015
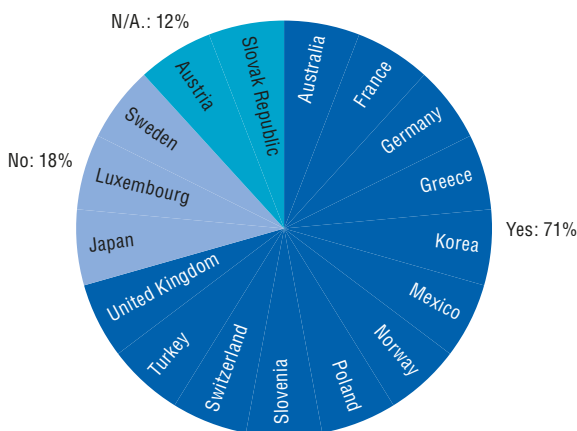
Source: OECD (2015), Survey on Risk Communication Policies and Practices, OECD, Paris.

StatLink http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933533568

12.10. Studies to assess the impact of risk communication, 2015

Source: OECD (2015), Survey on Risk Communication Policies and Practices, OECD, Paris.

StatLink http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933533587
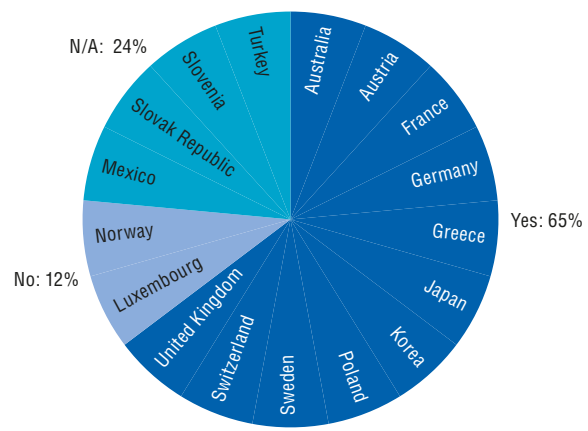
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