

A review and a good practice example of the Austrian emergency communication strategy and disaster management plans

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INTRODUCTION

Natural hazards have often devastating consequences in Austria. Between 1980 and 2010 about 40 natural disasters that caused 518 fatalities, economic losses of 5.62 billion US dollars and affected 71, 716 people have been identified (PreventionWeb 2015). The work presented here has been carried out during the EU funded project SEERISK („Joint Disaster Management risk assessment and preparedness in the Danube macro-region“) which aimed to harmonize the risk assessment process for climate change related hazards and to produce a common emergency communication strategy.

A review of the Austrian emergency communication strategy and disaster management plans was carried out in close collaboration with the Ministry of Interior and is presented in the following.

THE REVIEW

In Austria, disaster management is based on federal law principles and European directives aiming at the prevention of risk of natural hazards and at the reduction of losses and casualties. There is no general disaster management strategy available, instead numerous agencies and institutions have developed own concepts and strategies. For example, „Torrent and Avalanche Control“ is responsible for the development of hazard zone maps. The hazard zone maps are then available to the public. Additionally, various national, as well as transnational, projects for prevention planning, guidelines and strategies projecting the communication and public information processes in Austria have been carried out. The results of already completed and ongoing projects reflect the success of public participation and communication strategies within the management of natural disasters. In addition, a disaster management audit in Austria carried out in 2002 with a focus on floods (Adam 2008)

demonstrated the added value of public participation during planning as well as implementation processes, although it is not representative for the whole country and not for all natural hazards. However, specific indicators and effects related to the research areas as well as significant impacts for prevention and recovery phase have been identified. The content and the availability of information materials are of high importance for public information and communication strategies. Folders, brochures, as well as other information materials that contain expert targeted terminologies are often misunderstood by interested and affected people. In particular in recent years, the role of media through its different channels gets increasingly important in the communication of disasters and risks and needs therefore to be further incorporated in a general disaster management strategy.

A GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE: THE FLOODS OF 2005

On 22 and 23 August 2005 a hydrometeorological event triggered debris flows, landslides and floods, which had devastating consequences in Austria (Vorarlberger Landtag 2005). There were disruptions in the telecommunications sector and several hours of blackouts. Furthermore, partial failures were experienced in the power network and the radio broadcasting (both land-line and mobile telecommunications). Consequently, during the emergency phase a connection to the field personnel could only be established by the „Verbund“ radio system. This system is self-sufficient and provides continuous emergency power supply (Verbund 2005). As far as information to the public is concerned, warnings of the Central Institute for Meteorology and Geodynamics were sent automatically in the emergency phase by the Digital Information Platform (DIBOS) (Vorarlberger Landtag 2005) targeting in particular the military and civil defense forces. The system of DIBOS enables a link

to geographical data and integrated a digital database with various information. By DIBOS, the public and the media were informed very quickly about the weather warnings and it was possible to communicate with the media and the general public, via the intranet as well as the local television and radio channels.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The review of examples showed that the co-existing different emergency and risk communication strategies in Austria are rather successful. However, there is always space for improvement and for this reason a number of recommendations can be made. One major issue is, that it should be aimed to link the different concepts to a national disaster management strategy. This includes some specific issues. Regarding communicating information to the public, this should be given in a simple and comprehensive way using attractive and easy to read illustrations (maps, brochures etc.). Information for the public should be also target group oriented. For example, it has to be taken in account, that the increasing popularity of online information platforms only address certain groups leaving out others such as elderly people or people not having access to the required technology.

In this way, people at risk may not be informed. Particular emphasis should be given to the interpretation of scientific results. For example, green zones are often considered to be 100% safe, which is not always the case. In conclusion, it has to be considered that targeted projects are of exceptional importance beside legal requirements to achieve successful communication processes between the federal government and communities as well as experts and stakeholders. Thereby, interdisciplinary cooperation as well as risk government is essential not only to raise public awareness in particular but also to ensure a sustainable approach throughout the whole system of disaster management.

KEYWORDS

Disaster management; Emergency communication; Risk reduction strategy

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