



Are local communities prepared to face a future volcanic emergency at Vesuvius?

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The Vesuvius represents, undoubtedly, the icon of volcanic threats, since more than 600,000 people live very close to the volcano. This image is strengthened by the presence of the archaeological ruins of Pompeii and Herculaneum, buried by the 79 A.D. plinian eruption, testifying nowadays the highly destructive impact on humans, buildings and environments. Nevertheless, many young people live in the Vesuvian area show an inadequate preparedness to face the next eruption. This is inferred by the results of a multiple choice questionnaire, distributed to 400 high-school students in three municipalities located close to the volcano during the 2007. The questionnaire was aimed to understand the level of risk perception and preparedness of at-risk communities during the current quiescent period.

The interviewed students show high levels of fear, poor perceived ability to protect themselves from the effects of a future eruption, and insufficient knowledge of the National Emergency Plan for Vesuvian Area (NEPVA). This result suggests that, during a future eruption of Vesuvius, there may not be enough time to educate the large number of people living near the volcano about how to appropriately respond. The lack of knowledge about NEPVA is a sign of the absence of well-tested communication strategies and effective information dissemination in the study area. This lack of knowledge also means there is little interest in participating in risk-reduction activities. The inadequate risk education and preparedness of respondents implies that a strong effort is needed to improve communication strategies in order to facilitate successful evacuations. Therefore, it is important to take advantage of the present period of quiescence at Vesuvius to increase the risk perception of youth in local communities. In the absence of adequate preparedness measures, an evacuation could become “enforced” or even worse, a “failure.”