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Multiple hazards and public risk perceptions under COVID-19

Giuliano Di Baldassarre, Elena Raffetti, and Elena Mondino

Centre of Natural Hazards and Disaster Science (CNDS), Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

(giuliano.dibaldassarre@geo.uu.se)

The salience of global crises, such as COVID-19 and climate change, have plausibly influenced how people characterize and assess multiple hazards. In this study, we examine and compare how global crises and local disasters influence public perceptions of multiple hazards in Italy and Sweden by integrating the results of nationwide surveys with information about the occurrence of hazardous events. These included more than 4,000 participants and were conducted in three different phases of the COVID-19 pandemic (August 2020, November 2020 and August 2021), corresponding to various levels of infection rates. In line with the cognitive process known as the availability heuristic, we found that people are more worried about risks related to experienced events. In both countries, individuals assess the risk associated with a given hazard based on how easily it comes to their mind. Moreover, notwithstanding the ongoing pandemic, people in both Italy and Sweden are highly concerned about climate change, and they rank it as the most likely threat. Lastly, we found that public perceptions of multiple hazards are deeply intertwined. These outcomes do not only increase our knowledge on the way in which global crises and hazardous events shape public risk perception across different contexts, but also have the potential to inform communication strategies aiming to reduce disaster risk while supporting climate change adaptation.