Risk communication practices in Europe

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In the field of natural hazards risk communication research is still less developed and systematic that in other areas such as health, food, or technology. The recent paradigm shift from mere emergency recovery to proactive disaster prevention and mitigation in Europe and elsewhere, however, stresses the importance of effective risk communication to prepare for, prevent, cope with and recover from natural hazards. This development points at the need for comprehensive and integrated communication models spanning the time before, during and after natural hazard events. Such integrated communication models should acknowledge different needs, expectations and characteristics of actors (state and non-state agencies, organisations, groups, the public) at different levels, and the resulting diversity of objectives and required modes of communication.

As part of the CapHaz-Net action this paper briefly traces the development of risk communication from awareness raising campaigns to complex models that conceptualise one-way and two-way communication between different actors at different levels. We introduce a framework for identifying risk communication practices that takes into account different risk situations, purposes and modes of communication. Using this framework we map and discuss mainstream and innovative communication practices in Europe focusing on floods, alpine hazards and heat-related hazards. The emphasis will be on communication to prevent, prepare for and warn of natural hazards. Specifically, the review of practices gives an overview of who is involved, to what purpose, and by which means and communication modes. Attention will also be paid to the constraints and specific challenges facing risk communication. Based on these practices the paper explores the links between communication, capacity building and social vulnerability. We conclude by pointing at open questions and challenges for further research.