

Notes about Managing Volcanic Risk and Hazards*

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When I left Colombia last year to pursue a degree in communication after practicing my professional career as a geologist, seismologist and administrator in two volcano observatories and the Colombian Geological Survey-INGEOMINAS, I thought I was going to become an expert in the management of volcanic risk and hazards. Almost a year has passed and during this time I have had the opportunity to learn new things that have caused me to re-think that idea. I will focus this discussion on some aspects of volcanic risk management, particularly, on noncrisis scenarios¹. The use of the first person pronoun in my discussion is for two reasons: one to acknowledge that people have different opinions regarding this subject and the other is to emphasize that what is written here is the product of my own perspective, experience and background.

Certainly I have to accept that when I arrived to Arizona State University (ASU) I was thinking of communication only as a tool that could allow me to "fix" the communication between scientists and the community. From my very positivistic and quantitative perspective I thought I could "freeze" the communication process in order to manipulate its different components. As in seismic processing I thought I could "map" those areas where communication was not effective. I thought that I could "design" the best "path" for effective communication. However, through to the information received from the so-called "soft" disciplines of the social sciences I have understood that risk is a process the meaning of which is socially and individually constructed throughout the communication process. I learned that experts tend to focus fairly narrowly on what they are experts about and that organizational cultures and interests narrow the kinds of things considered legitimate to think about (Clarke & Freudenburg, 1993). I learned that the scientific aspects of risk "are embedded in a complex sociopolitical tapestry in which there are not only different voices but different perceptions of the problem" (Krimdky and Plough in Kasperson & Stallen, 1991, p. 5). I learned that risk "evolves" with the community and that in long-term situations in particular any manipulation or prediction could be a fallacy. I understood that particularly in non-crisis scenarios (prevention), instead of trying to represent a reality already lived more important is the awareness of living that reality, and that, therefore, instead of predicting and controlling the behavior and reactions of others, it could be more important to contribute positively with our knowledge and abilities to that collective construction.

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¹ I specify this because I believe that contrary to long term situations (prevention), in crisis situations (e. g., ongoing eruptions) where a quick reaction is needed and where people are often eager for information and prompt to receive guidance and instructions, manuals, handbooks, formulas, can be very useful.