



The L'Aquila process and the perils of bad communication of science

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Responsibilities and observance of ethical behaviour by scientists have increased more than ever with the advancement of science and of the social and economic development of a country. Nowadays, geoscientists are often charged by local and/or national and international authorities with the task of providing ways to foster economic development while protecting human life and safeguarding the environment. But besides technical and scientific expertise, in a democratic country all this requires efficient ways and various channels of scientific divulgation. Geoscientists themselves should be involved in these procedures, or at least they should be called to verify that correct communication is actually released. Unfortunately, it seems that awareness of such new and ever-increasing responsibilities is not yet being always realized at a needed level.

The question is especially sensible in Italy, a country in which the hydro-geological, seismological, volcanological and coastal set-up requires careful technical and scientific treatment. Given the fragility of the natural system, the role of geoscientists should not be restricted to the delivery of scientific expertise: in fact, and perhaps more than elsewhere, problems are compounded by the need of communication based on sound science not only to governing authorities, but also to the public at large, possibly including also an array of mass media. Many international organizations have been wrongly interpreting the accusation and especially the sentence at the first stage of the L'Aquila process as a problem of impossibility to predict earthquakes. But the recently published motivation of the sentence seems to have brought to light the lack of a scrupulous overview of the situation prior to the disastrous seismic event, practically leaving the task of public information to the judgment or perception of the national agency in charge of natural hazards. It turned out that a major outcome of the process, apart from the identification of guilt, was precisely the exposure of what should be called - fittingly enough - "bad communication of science". Possible conclusions to this unfortunate case will be examined and identified from various geoethical and ethical points of view. The final goal should be to suggest appropriate measures for informing correctly about potential risks and also to improve ethical and geoethical ways of thinking and acting in any scientific community.