



Euroscience on L'Aquila: Science to learn, not to be sentenced; public authorities to be centre stage

Euroscience strongly opposes the sentencing of seven Italian scientists, mostly seismologists, one being an Italian official, by an Italian judge for manslaughter for failure to warn and prepare the population of L'Aquila properly against the devastating earthquake in 2009. Euroscience believes that this sentence completely misjudges the nature of science, the responsibility of the scientific community and the way they should engage with policy and society at large. It also misjudges the responsibility of the public authorities. The scientific community has to learn lessons; public authorities have to learn more.

Scientists cannot and should not go beyond what they can reasonably state on scientific grounds. Scientists have a duty to inform society correctly and transparently be it in reports, public hearings or discussions with policymakers, and they should not withhold information. They need to refer to uncertainties and risks as well. But no scientist can forecast the timing of a specific earthquake. That there is a likelihood of a big earthquake not too far in the future can reasonably be known, which is what the Italian seismologists have told the public. The issue is about what justified or unjustified reassurance is instilled by such communications in the public, and that is certainly not an area for criminal prosecution.

To issue evacuation orders and to ensure that the public knows about and is trained in preventive and damage reducing measures, is the responsibility of the public authorities at national, regional or local level. It is not the role of scientists. When public hazards are at stake, the authorities take advice from scientists. Scientists all over the world accept the responsibility to scrutinise scientific evidence and to arrive at the best possible advice on risks and options for preventive or mitigating actions which the authorities should consider. This happens in Italy as well as elsewhere; the Risk Commission of the Italian Department of Civil Protection Agency is a case in point. It was called to meet in L'Aquila, and a day after (just days short of the earthquake) in a press conference of which the key scientists were not aware, information was given that apparently created an unwarranted sense of 'nothing to worry'.

Lessons are to be learned by the scientific community. More frequent risk monitoring, integrated risk assessments that include structural strength of buildings, more thought-through ways of communicating with a public that acquires and shares information ever so rapidly, are some examples. Scientists must be aware that when the public knows about them meeting it expects them to emphasize elementary personal precautionary measures. But key is that the public authorities are responsible for preparing and instructing the public what to do. In no way was there a justifiable ground to turn this into a criminal case against scientists.

The judge seems to have given more weight to the justified feelings of horror, personal loss and grievance of the victims than to a careful assessment of the state of the art in science and the roles of scientists and public authorities. These authorities carry the principal responsibility for decisions made and actions taken. They have also done very little since the catastrophe, as everybody can see who visits the region. Rather than focusing on the scientists, it would be more appropriate for the judicial system to look into the way the public authorities have acted and not acted before, during and in the aftermath of the L'Aquila earthquake. That would provide more relief to the victims and the region than sentencing scientists to serve prison terms and pay considerable penalties.

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