

>> **The Seveso III Directive
and its impact on risk
communication and emergencies**

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The coming into force of the European Directive Seveso III, 2012/18/EU on the control of the inherent risks in major accidents, expands the number of Spanish companies affected and which are required to report their risks to the population with the help of authorities. This directive will undoubtedly impact the communication policies of businesses and public administrations, civil protection and regional governments. It is time to review and adjust communication policies to the new requirements of the EU Directive.

The Seveso III Directive includes an obligation to adapt to the requirements of the Aarhus Convention on access to information, public participation in decision-making and access to justice in environmental matters. Many consider the Aarhus Convention as the most important with regards to the right of access to information, public participation and justice in environmental material as an international legal instrument. Currently the Convention applies throughout the European Union as well as the institutions of the EU.

Europe, in addition to increasing the legal requirements, is also driving the need to improve risk communication to the public at a time when its perception has increased among citizens. It is clear that there is a mistrust of the actions of many industries and, above all, the ability of regulatory authorities to control and enforce the law. Low compliance is to blame according to some experts involved in the Seveso II directive. The right to know of citizens has become a democratic principle to keep fighting for: "Participation in social and political life is the result of proper information and the lack of information of general or collective interest is a civic mutilation" (L. Machado, quoted in Wenderley, 2008: 3). The new requirements on information imposed by Seveso III will make the potential for debate, controversy and pressure on industry greater than ever, with a corresponding adjustment to local politics as well as the media and social networks.

In effect, Seveso III specifies that the public interested in it should have the opportunity to participate in the processes of decision-making in environmental matters. **In short, it allows citizens to participate in decisions about industrial activities and their impact on health and the environment** at an early stage and while options are still open.

As a result, the companies concerned will be required to review and update their communication strategy for addressing both the risks associated with their activities and for emergency management in collaboration with the authorities, which in turn will also improve their preparedness and ability to communicate.

In a first approximation, it can be said that large companies in general seem ready and willing to dialogue, which is required by Seveso III about risk communication. But we also know, from experience, that a high percentage of companies are not and are highly cautious about the idea of open communication. However, the risks of not adapting can be severe, even leading to the loss of a licence to operate. As for the government, the perception is that only a few are truly prepared to risk communication and crisis situations, especially at the municipal level. There are still many mayors who are not aware that they are responsible for Civil Protection in the City Council.

HAZARD COMMUNICATION PLANS

This new directive, if not handled professionally, is an important factor that increases the risk communication possibility of negative exposure among the main actors, in both the media and social networks. It also forces greater transparency and



therefore more exposure to debates and controversies over health and the environment. What is certain is that it makes organisations, public or private, more vulnerable for not being well prepared. This obliges them to improvise.

But Seveso III is also an opportunity for companies and public authorities to upgrade their communication policies, adapt and prepare for a new stage in their relationship with the environment. In this regard, it is important to organise risk management strategies and procedures, which would go through the following processes:

- **Research:** Understand the viewpoint of those responsible for the organisation of the administration, of the acting officers and civic associations to potential crisis situations. Their knowledge of managing them, their views on the preparation and adequacy of the current structure and proposals for change and development.
- **Analysis and review of procedures,** websites, plans and emergency risk communication materials. It concerns monitoring the effectiveness of the messages, procedures and means discovering any deviations that may affect the correct perception of risk control and transparency.
- **Communication Risk Plans** with all its stakeholders or interest groups, integrating the latest techniques that have already proved effective in Spain and other countries.
- **Training Programme on Crisis Communication, Risk and Public Emergencies.** Involve all members of the organisation by sharing research findings for discussion, for their commitment and to make proposals for improvements.

COMMUNICATION IN EMERGENCIES

Since the term "Risk Society"¹ was coined more than a quarter of a century ago following the accidents in Seveso and Chernobyl, there has been an increasing interest in managing information during emergencies and disasters and also for communication of the crisis from which these can originate. Unfortunately, the number of tragedies in our society is not small where confusion between the two concepts (communication of disasters or crisis communication) has caused disastrous results. This has especially been the case for the organisation that has not been able to properly differentiate them.

Operating with ease in this field will result in effective communication efforts in disasters. This occurred in the Madrid terrorist attacks on March 11 2004. Failure to do so leads to chaos and a collapse in information networks, which occurred on August 20, 2008 when a Spanair plane crashed at Adolfo Suárez Madrid-Barajas Airport.

The advent of social networks, and increased viral hoaxes and rumours are a challenge of colossal proportions in a scenario that involves an industrial type disaster. The goal of Seveso III is preventing its occurrence and reducing the consequences of an industrial disaster. The regulations changed in 2012 and the provisions have posed new challenges in communication.

Our desire to achieve these goals is greater considering the overall poor communication with regard to the

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implementation of the Seveso Directive to the public and administration.

When the 112 Emergency Centres are alerted of a fire, explosion or the release of a toxic substance in industry, a major challenge is faced in collecting information.

Usually the caller is unable to adequately provide the essential industry data except where it is located and its general activity. The situation is complicated if we talk about lower-level industries that do not require an External Emergency Plan.

When the fire service and health officials arrive at the site they are subject to high levels of stress due to the absence of specific data on the risks that they will face. It is quite normal to get to the accident site without knowing what substances might be present in the industry, in what quantities, where they are located and what their emergency plan involves.

On many occasions it is difficult to find someone in the company that has the accurate information to answer these questions. This situation is exacerbated when they attempt to find the Emergency Plan within the installation and it is either outdated or not available at all. In these cases the emergency services must use their own expert knowledge and qualifications to come up with a plan of action despite having almost no information.

Therefore, attending an incident of this kind at industrial facilities becomes something of a Russian roulette. In addition to that the fire hydrants in industrial areas often lack pressure.

This situation is significantly reduced in industries that have a superior External Emergency Plan (EEP). The obligation of the administration to monitor them closely means greater assurances with regard to latent risks and how to deal with them. In fact, emergency services routinely perform inspections and visits to learn about the facilities.

INFORMING THE PUBLIC AND EMPLOYEES

Although the administration knows the risks in high-level industries, it is not very common for simulations to take place with the involvement of nearby residents. There are of course exceptions. Catalonia and the Basque Country often carry out emergency simulations (at the very least with the supervisors of the emergency using sirens).

However, usually residents are generally unaware of the risks and protective action they should take in the event of an incident. This is one issue everybody (industry and government) should take seriously.

Industrial workers should also be included, as required by the law. Knowing the risks and how to act in case of a problem lessens the dangers. Having staff available can be of great help to participants because they can have all their questions answered.

CONCLUSIONS

The new directive passed in 2012 requires industries and management to provide information to the public about risks and protective measures. The novelty is that it requires that this information is also available in an electronic format. It seems reasonable considering the high level of Internet

¹ Beck, Ulrich. World Risk Society. Madrid. XXith Century, 2002.

penetration (more than half of all Spaniards use the internet daily².) The increasing number of mobile devices is justified (69.9% of Internet users reported having used some mobile device in the last three months to access information online.) Indeed, mobile broadband is already above 60%³. Regarding the use of social networks, 64.1% of Internet users participate in social networks like Facebook, Twitter or Tuenti. According to a report from the American Red Cross in 2011, 80% of respondents expected the administration to report emergencies on social networks.

According to Seveso III, industrial activity, the substances that it houses, their quantities, their risks and their emergency plan must be reported. And in the case of top-

level industries, we must also provide data on the external emergency plan. All this information must continue to be accessible analogically to nearby residents and public spaces. It must also be available electronically.

In short, a well-prepared business or public administration projects an image of confidence, accountability and transparency. This is the true goal of any risk and emergency communication. **So it is time to review and adjust communication policies to the new requirements of the Seveso III EU Directive and the new ethical and social requirements essential for a good reputation. And.... confidence to continue operating.**

² Source: La Sociedad de la información en España 2013. Fundación Telefónica. Page 36

³ Source: La Sociedad de la información en España 2013. Fundación Telefónica. Page 41



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