



IASPEI Press release on the L'Aquila sentence

The International Association of Seismology and Physics of the Earth Interior (IASPEI)¹, on behalf of the world community of seismologists, expresses its deepest concern for the L'Aquila verdict and prison sentence, that condemns for involuntary manslaughter seven prominent Italian scientists and members of the Great Risks Commission of the Italian Civil Defense, due to negligence and errors in the evaluation and communication of the seismic crisis preceding the L'Aquila earthquake of April 6, 2009, resulting in the regretful death of 309 people.

The mission of IASPEI is to advance global seismological knowledge to mitigate the effects and minimize the victims of earthquakes. The trial in L'Aquila condemns some of IASPEI's most brilliant scientists, who dedicated their lives to the reduction of seismic risk and to whom go our sympathy and support.

We do not express here opinions on the Italian judiciary system nor on the details of the sentence, but the trial in L'Aquila sets a disturbing and unprecedented case in linking the free expression of scientific opinions to casualties resulting from the collapse of poorly built or maintained buildings during earthquakes, with issues and ramifications relevant to the whole seismological community:

- IASPEI adheres to the statement on Freedom to Conduct Science and Responsibilities of Scientists² of the International Union of Geophysics and Geodesy and to the principles of the Universality of Science³ of the International Council for Science: the free thinking and conduct of scientific development is a principle of modern society and cannot be hindered or limited by threats of personal retaliation.
- IASPEI supports the development, testing and presentation of new evidence on earthquake forecasting and prediction; however, IASPEI is of the opinion that reliable short-term prediction of earthquakes is not possible at present; claims to the contrary may induce false expectations and incorrect behavior in the population and authorities, and are not supported by IASPEI.
- When serving on high-level advisory panels for governments and authorities, scientists have the duty to provide the state of knowledge in a comprehensive and unbiased fashion, to enable authorities to take the required mitigation actions. This cannot be achieved under the threat of public prosecution. A negative impact of this trial and sentence will be to make scientists reluctant to serve on risk advisory commissions or express expert opinions.
- Communication in a language understandable to public and authorities is of crucial importance, including the communication of uncertainties associated to all evaluations and projections.
- Scientists cannot be held responsible for effects that are not under their responsibility. Governments and authorities are responsible to ensure that appropriate strategies and measures for risk mitigation are in place and applied. Roles and responsibilities in the earthquake mitigation chain need to be clearly defined, understood and adhered to.

IASPEI is confident that the L'Aquila case will provide the opportunity to develop a proper link between science, policy makers and society in order to avoid any type of miscommunication of information and scientific knowledge in the future.

¹ <http://www.iaspei.org>

² http://www.iugg.org/resolutions/IUGG_for_freedom_to_conduct_science.pdf

³ <http://www.icsu.org/about-icsu/structure/committees/freedom-responsibility/statute-5>