

15 Communication with the public for prevention, preparedness and response

This chapter draws principles to facilitate the implementation of programmes and policies to ensure that the potentially affected public is well informed about existing or planned hazardous installations and to facilitate the opportunities for the public to provide input, as appropriate, into decision making by public authorities concerning such installations.

The following principles do not prejudice public authorities from instituting more extensive requirements related to the provision of information to the public or public participation. They focus on objectives to be achieved with respect to the provision of information to the public and public participation, and not on the procedural approaches which should be followed. It is recognised that countries allocate responsibility differently between the public and private sectors and among national, regional and local governments, and that countries have different legal and administrative frameworks with regard to the prevention of accidents and development of community emergency plans. In implementing these principles, countries should give consideration to the protection of confidential information, as defined under domestic law, including both proprietary data and information protected for reasons of national security.

Responsibilities of industry and public authorities

Industry and public authorities each have responsibilities to the public concerning prevention of, preparedness for and response to chemical accidents, including in the case of a chemical accident-causing transboundary effects.

Industry and public authorities should co-operate to ensure that the potentially affected public has the appropriate information to understand the risks they face and what they should do in the event of a chemical accident.

Industry is a primary source of information. It has the responsibility to provide this information to public authorities and, directly or indirectly, to the public. Industry should also be prepared to work with public authorities which develop emergency plans. Industry should maintain close relations with community leaders, education facilities and other members of their local population in order to help promote awareness and understanding of chemical accident risks. Industry should have an open attitude in its relations with the public.

Public authorities have the responsibility of ensuring that adequate and timely information is provided to the potentially affected public and that appropriate opportunities are available for public participation in certain decision-making processes. Public authorities also have the responsibility of ensuring that adequate emergency plans are in effect. They should also have a reactive role in responding to specific public concerns and monitoring reactions from the public following an accident (for example in social media).

Provision of information to the public

Members of the public who might be affected in the event of a chemical accident, including a chemical accident-causing transboundary effects, have a right to appropriate information so that they can be aware of the hazards and risks arising from the hazardous installations in their community. They should know where to obtain information concerning the installations and its hazards and understand what to do in the event of an accident.

Communicate on the risk of chemical accidents with the potentially affected public

The potentially affected public should be provided with information about the hazardous installations in their vicinity, without their having specifically to request it. This information should address:

- The types of industries in their area and the chemicals that are produced and used in these installations (the common names or, if more appropriate, the generic names or general danger classification of the substances involved at the installation that could give rise to an accident)

capable of causing serious offsite damage, with an indication of their principal harmful characteristics).

- The name(s) of the enterprise(s) responsible for the installation(s) and the address(es) of the installation(s).
- Information relating to the types of possible accidents, including an indication of the likelihood of each, that could cause serious offsite damage and their potential effects on health, the environment and property.
- Information about known natural hazards that might trigger a Natural Hazard Triggered Technological Accidents (Natech) (such as the fact that the installation is on a fault line or in a flood risk zone).
- Relevant information from inspections and other monitoring activities at hazardous installations available to the public. This should be in a form that can be readily understood and provide an opportunity for dialogue.
- The preventive measures that have been taken to minimise the likelihood of accidents.
- A reference to the offsite emergency plan.
- Point(s) of contact, where further explanatory information and clarifications can be obtained and feedback can be provided to rescue services and other authorities.
- Information concerning expected activities at the installation that may raise the concerns of neighbours (e.g. flares, odours).

Public authorities, along with industry, communities and other stakeholders should address the question of how to balance the need to provide information to the public and the need to protect information due to security concerns.

Communicate with the potentially affected public on how to prepare and react in case of a chemical accident

The information provided to the potentially affected public should include specific guidance on what to expect in the event of an accident and how they should react, including:

- Details about how they will be warned of an accident or imminent threat of an accident.
- Guidance concerning the actions to be taken and the behaviour to be adopted in the event of an accident (this guidance should be adapted to meet the needs of different groups, including sensitive groups, e.g. in hospitals, schools and homes for the aged).
- An explanation of why they should behave/act as described in the guidance so that they understand how this will result in a mitigation of adverse effects.
- The source(s) of post-accident information (e.g. radio, television, Internet).
- The source(s) for additional explanations/information.
- Point(s) of contact, where members of the public can provide public authorities with information related to a possible accident (i.e. if someone notices something unusual at the installation).
- How they will be informed when the emergency situation is over.

The members of the public potentially affected by a chemical accident should be carefully described and the information targeted so that all potentially affected people have adequate and appropriate information presented in an easily understandable manner.

Information should be provided in a timely fashion, be reissued periodically as appropriate and be updated as necessary. It should be clearly indicated that this information should be read immediately when it is received and be kept in a convenient place for reference in the event of an accident.

Communicate with the public in the case of a chemical accident

When alerted to a chemical accident, response authorities should activate their emergency plans that include mechanisms for ensuring that the public is notified of an accident and informed about what actions to take.

During and after an accident, timely, credible, sensitive, informed, factual and accurate information should be provided openly and continuously to the public.

- Such information should cover the offsite effects of the accident, the risks of further adverse offsite effects, actions to be taken by the public and related follow-up information.
- Communication with the public and media (social media, television, radio and print) during an accident demands special training and requires preparation. Templates and guidance should be developed as part of emergency planning. Contacts between media and the public should be developed and maintained as a long-term relationship.
- The media should have ready and continuous access to designated officials with relevant information, as well as to other sources, in order to provide essential and accurate information to the public throughout the emergency and to help avoid confusion.
- The media should facilitate response efforts by providing means for informing the public with credible information about chemical accidents, including guidance on actions to be taken by those potentially affected.

Ensure suitable messaging

It is important to recognise that the public is not homogeneous and, therefore, consideration should be given to whether there is a need to design different messages for different groups based on age, culture/language, educational background and level of risk for example.

The information provided to the public should be generally comprehensible (i.e. to individuals without technical knowledge or training) and be provided in a format and/or language that is easily read and understood. Members of the community should be consulted to help ensure that the message developed and the language used are appropriate for the community.

Those responsible for designing communication programmes should recognise that messages will be interpreted by the recipients, filtered based on individual experience and evaluated based on levels of trust and other factors (such as whether there have been conflicting messages). It is important to understand these influences and shape the messages accordingly. The communication messages should take into account foreseeable actions that conflict with the required behaviour (e.g. not collecting children from school; observing the accident from a dangerous location; ignoring instructions from emergency responders).

The information should permit all relevant individuals to understand their responsibilities (for example, teachers in the vicinity of a hazardous installation require special information and training in view of their responsibilities in the event of an accident and to assure parents that their children will be safeguarded).

Develop mechanisms for communication

In order to avoid confusion and facilitate information exchange, the mechanisms for obtaining and delivering information should be as clear as possible and, as far as possible, use known and existing channels.

- Those designing means for providing information to the public should take into account experience obtained in risk communication in other, related fields (e.g. natural disasters).
- There should be co-ordination of the different communication channels used.
- Members of the community should be consulted when the process for communicating with the public is being designed and implemented. Professional advice on communication should be sought.

In order to enhance individual recall and help ensure that all target audiences are reached, the messages should be repeated periodically and different methods/channels of communication should be used.

As the media are a channel of information to the general public, media input should be encouraged in the development and implementation of the communication process related to emergency planning.

- There should be clearly identified media source(s) for obtaining information in the event of an accident and the public should be informed about these sources.
- Industry and public authorities should provide representatives of the media with relevant information concerning hazardous installations so that the media have the necessary background to be an effective and reliable source of information for the public should an accident occur.

In cases where a hazardous installation is located near a border or transboundary watercourse or international lake and is as such capable of causing transboundary effects, in case of an accident, mechanisms should be in place to ensure that information is provided to and understood by all stakeholders on both sides of the border potentially affected in the event of an accident. The country receiving the information should ensure that this information is provided to all stakeholders within its jurisdiction that may potentially be affected.

Box 15.1. Public awareness and community preparedness

Awareness and education of all community members

Low public awareness of the need for preparedness can undermine local governmental support for preparedness programmes, can foster lower attention to individual safety at home and in public spaces and can decrease safety precautions in the workplace. The point of preparedness is to minimise the impact of a chemical accident through the actions of all community members, rather than the actions of only facility and response agencies.

- Preparedness includes awareness and education for all community members that could be impacted by a chemical accident and creates expectations for the actions of all community members should an accident occur.
- Support is needed from all levels of government in providing tools and assistance to heighten public awareness of the importance of preparedness.
- All levels of government need to have high expectations for the participation of the general community members in their own preparedness. Success requires education on risks and the expectations of the community on general preparedness capabilities.

- There is a great potential benefit to facilities, communities, emergency planners and emergency responders in developing a common understanding of the chemical hazards and accident preparedness capabilities present in their communities.

Preparedness is based on:

- The community developing a broad awareness and understanding of the risks that are present, locally.
- A community-wide evaluation of which community members are most vulnerable to risks, the mechanisms or pathways of risks, and the existing capabilities to address those risks should an accident occur.

Understanding the response capabilities

In most communities there is a lack of understanding regarding risks and the capabilities of the community to respond to those risks, often because emergency response agencies have not educated the public on the limitations of their capabilities. Members of the public are entitled to know whether or not emergency response authorities are capable of effectively responding to chemical accident risks in their communities. If not, then filling this capability gap becomes a process of educating the public on the steps they must take to protect lives and property.

Since all communities have capability gaps when evaluated against the risks present in the community, the subsequent step is strategic planning to fill those capability gaps with prioritisation for these efforts developed by the community members.

Filling capability gaps requires the use of all the regulatory and social tools available to the community and its partners. Addressing the identified capability gaps can include a broad range of options such as accident prevention and the creation of expectations for the actions of community members to be able to shelter, evacuate and provide aid to others.

Stakeholders involved

Accomplishing these tasks is a community-level activity. While it should be led by an emergency manager or local emergency planning committee, the key to successful preparedness planning is broad co-ordination and co-operation involving all community members. Management of facilities must be part of the preparedness effort because of their greater expertise on the properties of the hazardous chemicals present at their plants, knowledge of their operating systems and procedures, hazard assessments, their emergency plans and emergency response capabilities.

Public participation

Whenever possible and appropriate, the potentially affected public should be given the opportunity to participate, by providing their views and concerns, when decisions related to siting and licensing of hazardous installations and the development of emergency plans are being made by public authorities. In all cases, adequate information about the opportunity to participate should be given.

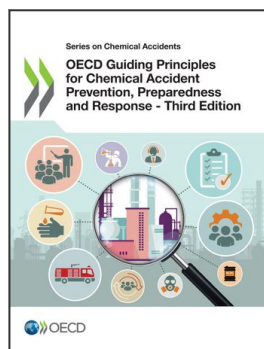
As appropriate, a variety of mechanisms for public participation in decision-making processes can be used. These mechanisms can include those for direct public participation, such as open public hearings, and those for indirect public participation by means of, for example, open consultative procedures.

In some countries, local safety committees have been established with representatives of the installation, local authorities and local residents which, among other things, facilitate the flow of information from the installation to persons who live and work in the area and co-ordinate local participation in appropriate decision-making processes.

The mechanisms for public participation and the scope of participation should be adapted to the nature of the decision being made and to who may be affected by the decision while taking into account applicable law and practice.

In determining who should be given the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes, public authorities should consider which persons are seriously threatened by a potential accident and the nature of the decision being made. For example, in the case of the development of a community emergency preparedness plan, the local community near the hazardous installation might have the opportunity to participate. In the case of a siting decision for an installation which could have serious adverse effects on a watershed, national park or natural resources of more than local concern, the provision might be made for broader participation, for example by allowing comments from representatives of public-interest organisations (e.g. environmental, agricultural or forestry groups).

Providing an opportunity for public participation should not affect the ultimate responsibilities of the public authorities with respect to decision making in this area.



From:

OECD Guiding Principles for Chemical Accident Prevention, Preparedness and Response - Third Edition

Access the complete publication at:

<https://doi.org/10.1787/162756bf-en>

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD (2023), "Communication with the public for prevention, preparedness and response", in *OECD Guiding Principles for Chemical Accident Prevention, Preparedness and Response - Third Edition*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/93da1e98-en>

This document, as well as any data and map included herein, are without prejudice to the status of or sovereignty over any territory, to the delimitation of international frontiers and boundaries and to the name of any territory, city or area. Extracts from publications may be subject to additional disclaimers, which are set out in the complete version of the publication, available at the link provided.

The use of this work, whether digital or print, is governed by the Terms and Conditions to be found at <http://www.oecd.org/termsandconditions>.