

Author's Accepted Manuscript

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www.elsevier.com/locate/ijdr

PII: S2212-4209(18)30055-4
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2018.04.015>
Reference: IJDRR871

To appear in: *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*

Received date: 12 January 2018
Revised date: 14 April 2018
Accepted date: 16 April 2018

Cite this article as: Sandra Appleby-Arnold, Noellie Brockdorff, Ivana Jakovljević and Sunčica Zdravković, Applying cultural values to encourage disaster preparedness: lessons from a low-hazard country, *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2018.04.015>

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Applying cultural values to encourage disaster preparedness: lessons from a low-hazard country.

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ABSTRACT

We present results from the CARISMAND project¹, which investigated the relationships between risk perception and cultural factors in man-made and natural disasters. The present study focused on attitudes, feelings and perceptions in a “low-risk” country, the island of Malta. This research location was chosen due to its unique geographical and geo-political position. In combination with the low level of prevalent disaster risk, it can be seen to be particularly suitable for elucidating cultural factors which are strong enough to generate behavioural change in such an environment and allow further insight into the relationship between risk perception, culture and behaviour. The data were collected during a Citizen Summit (held in Malta in 2016) which combined quantitative inquiry, for measuring cognitive and emotional responses related to risk perception, with qualitative methods that follow the “fluid” character of culture. We found that disaster risk perception showed only weak links to preparedness intentions, supporting other published results. Focus group discussions revealed several cultural traits, most prominently strong family values and social cohesion, which was also supported by the quantitative data. Furthermore, we found evidence of how personal values are transformed into cultural values, and how these can work in favour, or against, a motivation to prepare for disasters. Our results suggest that integrating shared local values, shared everyday experiences, and shared local memories in risk communication strategies and behavioural guidelines may be effective in encouraging citizens’ disaster preparedness.

Keywords: Risk perception; culture; disaster preparedness; citizen summits; social cohesion.

1. Introduction

The analyses and results in this study are based on data collected during a Citizen Summit held in Malta in 2016 as part of the CARISMAND project, which investigates the role of cultural factors in disaster preparedness, response and recovery from a variety of perspectives. This one-day event combined public information with feedback gathering through different methods of

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¹ This research was carried out as part of the CARISMAND (Culture And RISK management in Man-made And Natural Disasters) research project which received funding from the European Union under the Horizon 2020 Programme (2014-2020), Grant Agreement Number 653748, co-funded by the European Commission.

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