

The expert view: engaging media on avoiding disasters

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Interviewee: [Lisa Robinson](#) – Independent Advisor & Consultant

November 2025

Gareth: Thank you for making the time to discuss your media-related work and your thoughts on [the Disasters Avoided project](#). An important part of our work is to collect and share examples and case studies of purposeful work being undertaken to avoid disasters around the world, large and small, recently and from the past (including the distant past). The examples we are collecting are part of a body of knowledge that we hope can be of value to practitioners and broader society around the world.

We started documenting disasters avoided in September 2022, and since this time we are seeing the importance of the right messaging about disaster risk and resilience in the media and elsewhere.

Can we begin this interview by asking about your background and experience, especially about media coverage of disasters, disasters avoided and related topics? I know you spent about twenty years with the BBC up to the start of 2025.

***Lisa:** It's a pleasure to discuss with you the topic of media and disasters, including the positive side of how to avoid them.*

My background is in strategic media and communication for social impact (I am not a journalist). I focus on taking a systems approach or view of what can create effective change across society, including who is in a good position to influence this change, looking at media and communication as a critical tool for bringing these conversations together.

For about 20 years up to 2025, I was with [BBC Media Action](#), the BBC's international development charity. My role there was to work with partners in low- and middle-income countries on a wide range of issues. I focused on climate resilience, disaster risk reduction, and humanitarian response. In this role I liaised with technical experts in these areas and with local media.

Part of my activities included building the skills of different stakeholders so that they could engage better with each other – and in turn – with the public about disaster risks and humanitarian response through effective media and communication. Public dialogue at scale is a critical mechanism for innovation, good risk governance, and prompting inclusive action.

Gareth: Thanks for this context, Lisa.

You mentioned a few points just now that resonate with me, including systems thinking, which is central to the approach we are taking with our Disasters Avoided initiative.

One of our points about avoiding disasters is that disasters are not natural. In our work, we support the movement (which has been around for some time) to not call disasters “natural” – No Natural Disasters – which is supported by [UNDRR](#). A hazard can be natural, but a disaster and a vulnerability is not. It is the decisions people make that directly or indirectly expose people and / or put them in a vulnerable situation (to a hazard).

A lot of this links into how well we adhere to and use good sustainable development practices. This premise of disasters not being natural is linked to [our definition of a disaster](#), which we have kept simple (appreciating that other detailed definitions exist), which is: *A major situation requiring outside support for coping.*

Is the premise that disasters are not natural something you use and see being used by others (we are always interested in all views on this point)?

Lisa: I am aligned with this thinking, and I see that within the disaster risk sector it is widely acknowledged and understood (though not used everywhere). It has been making its way into public dialogue through the media gradually, in part due to some great work amongst disaster risk practitioners who have made the concept of how and why disasters happen more accessible. When we see references in the media to “natural disasters”, it may be mirroring agencies that still use that term, or it may be a choice to reflect language that is familiar to audiences; it’s instant and easy to grasp.”

Let’s consider the working environment of the journalist for a moment. Newsrooms are fast-paced with limited budgets, especially in small independent media. They rarely have experts on staff who are familiar with the terms that disaster risk professionals use daily. Journalists are skilled at presenting complex concepts in a public-facing way, but they are working under constraints.

Disaster risk experts can help by connecting with journalists and offering practical information that makes their job of reporting facts and telling human stories easier.

Gareth: Thanks for this point about the context to how the media uses the term “natural disaster”, Lisa.

Whilst we keep seeing and hearing references to “natural disasters” in parts of the media, we do appreciate that it can be a convenient shortcut. I have written to a few media organisations by e-mail to ask if they would consider changing the wording of sections in their newspapers that focus on disasters, and the wording they use in articles. Maybe I should think harder about suggesting what term could replace it (perhaps just “disaster”, with the context about it being clear in the content).

I also write into media outlets and to journalists directly when I see good examples of media coverage about upfront planning to avoid disasters (one example that I wrote in about in a positive way in 2025 is [an article published in the Guardian in July 2025 about preparedness planning to avoid a tsunami disaster](#)).

I appreciate that media organisations and journalists are very busy people, and they have to manage lots of information and lots of feeds continuously, and to work to deadlines. Indeed, by speaking with and interviewing some journalists I have seen how efficiently they manage their time, and it is impressive I must say.

Lisa: It's good to hear that you reach out to media outlets and journalists with positive feedback. More often when they receive feedback it is criticism rather than attempts to engage positively. Remember, they're not only covering risk and disaster – they are covering a whole range of different technical and general topics every day.

When you see themes and articles that are well covered, and you make the effort to say 'good job', they'll remember that. And it might just open the doors to more in-depth, well-informed reporting on risk.

Choosing which words to use to describe 'no natural disasters' requires thought. Replacing "natural disaster" with "natural hazard" may sound too technical for some audiences. However, with some explaining at first, media outlets can start changing the framing. Risk experts have a role in helping with that.

Gareth: I have seen some good articulation of action taken to avoid disasters by various media outlets, large and small. For example, there are articles, podcasts and other media that talk about the key decisions and development choices that can lead to or help to avoid disasters. Plus, I know that media organisations provide themed stories on a regular basis about positive “upside” news – for example, through curated newsletters that focus on “the good stories”. I assume this is a conscious effort by them to avoid getting people in a “doom loop” of constant news about problems and bad situations (including disasters).

*Lisa: It's an interesting point. What you are describing is similar to **solutions-based journalism**. Two New York Times writers, Tina Rosenberg and David Bornstein, are credited with starting this movement. This approach covers not only the news, but also efforts made to find solutions to challenges. Reporting about possible solutions must still follow good editorial practises of being impartial, unbiased, analytical, and fact-based. It's not about 'good news' or 'success' stories, but about opportunities and efforts for improvement.*

Resilience and risk reduction measures can offer valuable contributions to solutions-based journalism. Risk experts can support this approach, by suggesting content through a solutions-based lens. Journalists have a job to do, and their editorial independence will always come first. But if you share stories and ideas that are relevant to their audiences, and are backed up with credible expertise, this is a good starting point.

[The Solutions Based Journalism Network is available to access online.](#)

Gareth: Thanks for this explanation of solutions-based journalism, Lisa. I'll see how we can use the solutions-based approach in our case studies.

[We document and publish examples of disasters avoided that we find out about through the Disasters Avoided website](#). We are wondering how, along with others we liaise with including sustainable development experts and scientists, we could work with the media. Perhaps linking with solutions-based journalism is a way to do this.

For suggestions towards solutions-based journalism, I wonder if we could help by providing some “disasters avoided” examples, through stories of good action. I know some media outlets have “by invitation” sections that invite people to present what is happening about opinions and / or examples of driving change and positive development.

Lisa: It's worth noting that one driver behind solutions-based journalism is to counter the risk of news avoidance, especially among younger people. The thinking is that there's so much bad news out there that a lot of young people are turned off by it, and they engage through mediums or channels that provide a more action-oriented take on things. Solutions-based journalism is a way of presenting difficult problems in a compelling way by saying: “Here's a problem, and here's what people are trying to do about it”. It's a way of making some really tough issues more inviting to read.

Two examples I'm familiar with are from the BBC World Service – one is called [People Fixing the World](#), and another is [The Climate Question](#). These programmes present and discuss tough problems and what people are doing to address them.

Solutions-based journalism aside, bear in mind that journalists will be asking about the timeliness of an issue for coverage: “why now”? Coordinating pitches for stories with any important anniversaries – such past disasters or upcoming events can make abstract issues more relevant to audiences.

Gareth: Thank you for these two programme examples, and the further advice on solutions-based journalism. You raise a good suggestion, for us to think about upcoming important anniversaries of events that have happened – and maybe to look at (if it exists) good work that has been carried out to improve resilience and reduce risk since the event. Plus, to look at near misses and good work undertaken from learning about them – for localised events, not just the major ones that make international news. This includes engaging with local press and local media organisations, not just the large ones.

Our [newsletter published in September 2025](#) focuses on some solutions-focused aspects of disasters and the climate. [In a discussion we held](#) with the Environmental Journalist and Founder of [Sustain What](#), Andy Revkin, we talked about the danger of overusing narratives. As Andy describes, when we think about what makes a great story in a newspaper, it's often a narrative of “good versus bad.” It comes from deeply rooted parts of how humans think about the world, and how we have evolved by being told stories. A good story has an issue, a turning point and a resolution.

However, we can get the narrative wrong for various reasons.

Andy came up with the idea of a #narrativecapture tag to use after he kept seeing examples of this happening. Do we need to tackle the “default media narrative” about disasters for a change in approach to occur?

***Lisa:** We need to help media and communication professionals to better understand disaster risk. Great storytellers will transform this information into narrative that better reflects its complexities and resonates with audiences’ lives.*

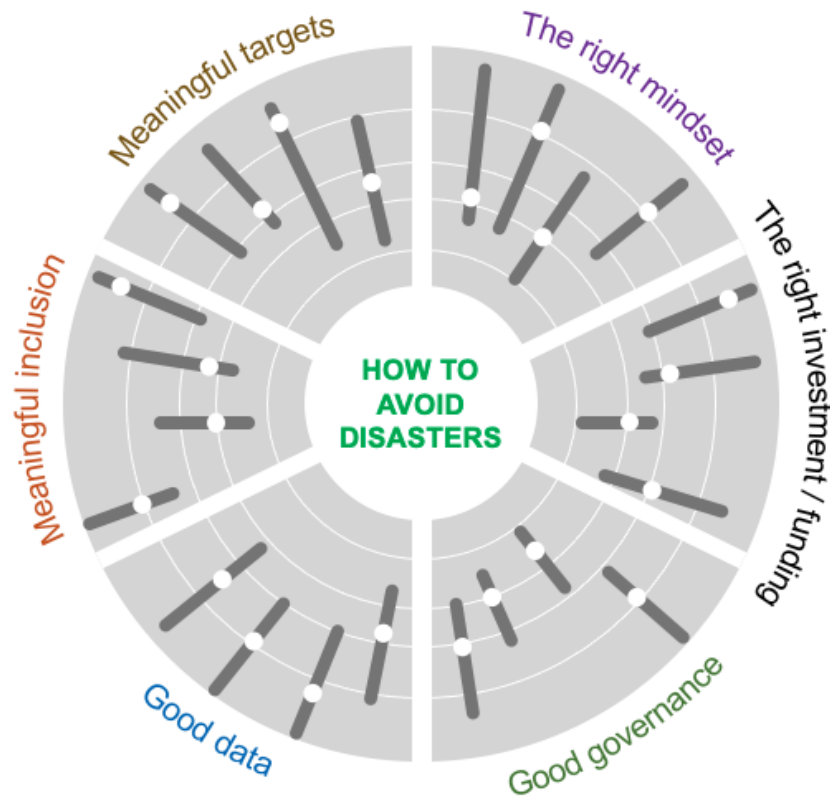
Too often, we talk about communication in relation to news reporting or public messaging. However, most forms of media and the arts can foster informed public debate, public dialogue, public exchange of knowledge, and I think there are many untapped areas of media and communication that could cover disaster risk.

I'd like to see more creativity and interaction among media and other stakeholders. Media can link decision makers in government, the private sector, academia, civil society, and others on complex questions around risk. Governance is very important and there's not enough public involvement on most issues. Media and communication that both informs the public and also brings them into some of these conversations will result in a richer exchange which should lead to better decision making on different levels

Gareth: Thanks for raising this point, Lisa. In a lot of our disasters avoided work, and in my linked work in urban development as well, we talk about [meaningful inclusion](#) and the engagement of all of society. Local people are experts in their local area, and they can provide valuable knowledge and input into actions required. A big part of finding out about people’s views, we think, is to go to the places where people live and where they gather as part of their regular lives, rather than asking them to travel somewhere such as “town hall” to join a debate. We have been fortunate to present our model to some groups in this way.

The point about meaningful inclusion is part of [a six-factor model for avoiding disasters](#) (explained below), with each of these six points having detail behind them. Does this model make sense, to you and is it something that we could use for liaising with the media about action to avoid disasters?

Do you have any ideas on how we can foster strong public engagement? You mentioned young people earlier and the challenges news organisations face in engaging them nowadays.



[The Disasters Avoided model](#): © G Byatt, I Kelman & A Prados

Lisa: We need to think about integrating public communication and engagement throughout approaches to disaster risk management – not just dedicating one segment to ‘outreach’. This requires engaging people as part of their everyday lives, meeting people through the conversations they are already having and bringing in elements of disaster risk and resilience into these conversations.

This requires a communication strategy, including media if you want scale. For starters, I would think about which groups are not engaged but are directly affected and what’s important to them in their lives. In other words, consider their agenda for starters.

The more we can be creative with media outputs that meet people’s daily needs – of connectedness, entertainment, and information - the more we can help people talk about issues that directly affect their lives. I don’t think this is being done enough.

Gareth: I appreciate the perspective that we should think about and tap into a range of ways for the public to be brought into a discussion about what we can all do to avoid disasters and manage risk.

I do a lot of work associated with cities, and I know that a lot of effort towards engagement is undertaken by city and municipality teams around the world. I have been involved with some of these teams who create programmes of activities, sometimes lasting for a month, to which they invite the public and technical professionals alike to discussions and events of various types, including getting a range of people in for interesting reviews.

The Disasters Avoided initiative highlights examples of proactive action around the world to avoid disasters.

I also think about how disaster risk communication is undertaken in different countries. Japan is a country that comes to my mind as a society that respects the power of nature. The public rehearses public emergency alert drills. Children know what to do. Adverts and notifications about publications such as handbooks flash up on subway digital screens, and videos are posted on social media.

I appreciate that different cultures have different ways of looking at the power of nature. Some cultures look at it in ways that scientists may find challenging, but that doesn't mean to say they're wrong.

Lisa: Everywhere is different, based on historical events, living memory, and more. Understanding a population's experience and perception of risk should always be a starting point for planning how to talk with audiences about disaster risk. The more tailored to local references, the better.

One good example I have seen of mainstream media addressing multiple aspects of disaster risk, including disaster risk governance, is a [Polish Netflix series called High Water](#). As a multi episode drama it unpicks climate modelling, climate change, tradition, privilege, civil society, disability, addiction, and more. All serious issues, but they unfold through compelling stories with all the edginess you need for a good drama that people want to watch. It plants many discussion points for audiences to pick up on after watching, such as:

- "How capable is our city to manage a major flood?"*
- "What is the strategy for releasing water, and who does this action protect?"*
- "Are evacuations mandatory, and if so, how do we evacuate?"*
- "Is my city investing enough in flood protection infrastructure?"*

We know that solutions to address these types of challenges include technical answers – and they also require public participation. In the case of this Polish drama series, critical discussion points were embedded into the storyline. It's the kind of high-quality media that connects well with people who lead busy lives.

Gareth: Thanks for this example, Lisa. You bring up some good points about how to engage with people in a compelling way about disaster risk.

Your point about compelling TV drama prompts me to think about other television streaming examples including one about [Hurricane Katrina](#), which is on Netflix (it was launched 20 years after the hurricane happened, in 2005 – so in line with your earlier point about being mindful of anniversaries of events). Also, there is The Lost Bus, a film on Apple TV+ about [the 2018 Camp Fire in California](#). Both deal with real disaster events, one a hurricane and flooding, the other a huge wildfire.

I appreciate that these types of television productions require sizeable budgets, and that a local authority isn't going to have the kind of money on hand to make their own production – nonetheless, perhaps they can leverage what exists in an appropriate way (without compromising any usage and IP rights by the owners of such content).

Our current Disasters Avoided case study format is one and two-page summaries of good work that [we publish on our website](#). We keep them brief, whilst ensuring they are supported by detailed research. Some case studies are at a national level, some are local, and some are at an individual level, such as smart action people took to protect their house or how they are supporting their local community. As well as these one and two-pagers, we will give some thought to how we could communicate case studies and stories in different ways (solutions-based), with the resources we have available.

***Lisa:** As you point out, the budgets of major media outlets are obviously different. But so are their purpose and skillset. That's where collaboration between media experts and technical experts can be so valuable. Their job is storytelling. The easier you can make their job – with reliable and relatable information – the more helpful you will be.*

Where possible, take it down to the story of one individual – the woman who led neighbourhood action to buy sandbags for the whole street, which saved homes. If you can, talk about people in a way that the public can easily identify with. Perhaps these people are similar to those who live on their street. Talk about the actions they took, the roles they had and the challenges they overcame. What was or is it about their behaviour that you want people to know about? Are they role models that you want others to respect and emulate? Do you want people to think: "If she can do it, so can I."

In this way, you are not only sharing the facts and the details and the stories of what happened, you are also helping connect these facts in ways that can motivate others.

There are many reasons why people do not take action to reduce the level of risk they are exposed to – practical, psychological, structural. By being targeted about how you frame and share success stories, and what you want people to do with them, you can address some of the barriers to generating action.

When you approach media outlets, think about what the media practitioner has to produce by the end of their working day or week, which is to generate a piece of work that will interest their audience. Perhaps ask them what would be of interest, and whether you can help them with information and connections they can build on. What format would work for them? Would it be helpful if they were given (with permission) contacts of people who may be interested in sharing their stories, such as local heroes or local leaders? Be upfront about your purpose of helping people better understand what causes disasters and how we can all take action to avoid them. And remember, news reporters need and value independence, so ultimately, the final story is in their hands.

Gareth: Thanks for this advice. Are there any knowledge sharing forums that journalists, in their busy lives, go to that might be a way to connect with them? We know that there are plenty of multilateral events, government-sponsored and business forums, and good local-specific ones that focus on disaster risk reduction.

Lisa: *I am aware of groups of journalists who gather in forums internally within organisations. How they connect with external sources differs.*

[The Oxford Climate Journalism Network](#) is a strong reference point and valued by news reporters.

[The Science Media Centre](#) spans across all aspects of science, including disaster risk, resilience and the climate. They exist to bridge technical experts with journalists.

Beyond news, one entity which works with the screen industry is called [albert](#), which is backed by BAFTA. It's a coalition of broadcasters from the TV and film industry. Originally they focused on sustainable productions to lower carbon emissions across the media industry, but they also focus on editorial aspects of climate change – sometimes referred to “planet placement”. This involves ensuring storylines, references a varied range of content have a positive influence on people and planet. They provide expertise and training for media producers on how to achieve this, with their work including briefings on facts.

Gareth: Thanks for these links, Lisa.

I'd like to get your views on the related matter of education now. Do you have any thoughts about how we could support education and knowledge about disasters and how to avoid them? I am thinking about tomorrow's journalists at university and how to discuss the subject with children and young adults in schools and colleges. Young people are good at asking hard questions.

Lisa: *I'm not an education expert, but I can imagine nearly every curriculum could incorporate disaster risk into their studies in some way. In the UK, the [British Red Cross has teaching resources prepared for school aged children](#). The English national curriculum for GCSEs and A Levels was [updated in 2014](#) and uses the term 'natural hazards'.*

Planting concepts and ideas for discussion amongst people in different professions and vocations is a start. I'd like to see more opportunities for people across different sectors to come together to generate ideas and learning.

Educational settings can join sectors in media, local governance, the private sector, NGOs, young people to challenge themselves and each other on tough issues around risk and resilience.

Gareth: It's good to see these examples of action in education. One of the areas I have looked at for some time is how to frame and hold difficult conversations. It's an interesting area. You make a good point about cross-society conversations. Whilst there are plenty of forums that are held about disaster risk reduction, they tend to take place in their own sphere and on a certain technical level. It's good that these events take place, but I wonder whether the people who attend them come from a broad enough spectrum.

Something I have done for a number of years with different people is to hold hackathon events, in which a large group of people from different viewpoints form into teams to quickly tackle pressing problems and solve different problems, presenting their ideas to each other along the way. Maybe there are some opportunities to hold things like this moving forwards, in an all of society type of approach?

I also wonder about the potential for video games that can support challenging situations about disaster risks.

***Lisa:** UNDRR has a video game called 'Stop Disasters'. It would be good to understand what kind of impact that has had.*

I'd love to see a real life immersion facility, where people can go to a theme park or another venue to experience and experiment with risk reduction, anticipatory action, and response – a little like the mini-city [KidZania](#) experience, where kids can practise professions and learn what it's like to be a firefighter, for example.

This type of facility and experience could include simulations that get people thinking about governance, engineering, structures, and communication in earthquakes, tsunamis, floods and wildfires.

Gareth: I like the idea of the immersion experience. How to make the discussion about disaster risk and resilience truly engaging and interactive for people is an interesting area to explore, Lisa.

Your point here reminds me of [the UCL PEARL facility in east London](#), which is [a unique and customisable laboratory space](#) to study the senses and explore how people interact with their environment.

I mentioned earlier that I carry out work associated with cities and towns, and you have reminded me of activities the Municipality of Bordeaux in France undertakes for their annual resilience campaigns in October, in which they seek to involve as many of their citizens as possible in various discussions about resilience ([their 2025 programme is their most recent example](#)). For example, one of the things they did in their 2024 campaign was to get artists involved in simulating what it's like to be in a storm, using different ways of engaging the senses, which people found quite powerful.

It's interesting to reflect on the point that cities and towns are where we have the highest density of population, yet ironically, because of how we've designed big cities, people can feel more isolated there rather than in a small town or a village. As we've seen with a few points discussed in this interview, we need to engage with people in different ways.

Are there any additional aspects we need to consider for urban environments and the density of where people live?

Lisa: *In urban areas, you'll likely find NGOs and other civil society organisations that are already attempting to connect with hard-to-reach or isolated groups. Risk communication strategies can build on these existing efforts.*

Your strategy will also consider whether you're aiming to connect directly with the people who feel more isolated, or if you want to engage with the people who can influence the living situation and safety levels of those who are vulnerable?

For engaging with the public, it goes back to the point about connecting with people in their everyday lives. If the discussion is pegged to family, finances and possibly fun, that is an approach that may engage people to talk about risk in relation to these things. They're already overloaded with obligations and if you turn up and say: "We'd like to talk about something grim, a bit complicated and dull, and probably expensive – are you interested?", I don't think it's going to be a huge success. Yet done in the right way, it can be quite simple to get good engagement, as we've talked about earlier. Disaster risk affects every aspect of our lives, so how do we meet people where they are and find out how this point links to what they already care about. This is where communication strategies are so important.

When you're asking people to give up even a small amount of their time and their attention and maybe resources to talk about this matter, we should be very clear about why it's in their interest to do so – practically and emotionally.

When planning, we should think beyond "awareness raising". It's a vague term and assumes that if people are 'aware' they will take action, which is rarely the case. As we were talking earlier about avoiding the term 'natural disasters', 'awareness raising' really needs to be replaced by a more specific description. Is the aim to shift emotions, knowledge, perception, help people take small actions, and have a discussion to reach a conclusion? Communication for each of those outcomes could be very different. Risk communication will be more effective when we are precise about what we'd like to see happen as a result. It will also help us get better at measuring our impact. If we don't know exactly what we want to happen, then we can't really measure how successful it was.

Gareth: I'll add "friends" to the point about pegging a discussion to family, finance and fun. Thanks for this suggested approach to engaging with people – these are very good points. I am anticipating that we need to consider people's different circumstances and what's important to them now and for the future.

Are there any good examples you can provide of impact being measured that you've come across or been involved in?

Lisa: *There are not enough examples that are measured and publicised, but I recently collected a handful that make an attempt to measure the impact. [UNDRR has put this collection on their risk communication hub.](#)*

Making an attempt to measure that impact is important and it doesn't have to be extremely complicated or difficult.

If you are clear about what you want to happen as a result of your communication, then you'll be able to measure it. It also means being realistic about what you expect to happen. A few social media posts will not change the world. Being very specific means that you will be more effective in your communication and measuring the impact will not only tell you if you were effective, it can help to inform the rest of the practitioner community about what's working.

Gareth: Anything else, Lisa, regarding this in-depth discussion that we have just had about communications and engagement?

Lisa: Just to reiterate that we can really advance risk communication by bringing together different, even unexpected stakeholders, being very clear about what we expect to happen, enabling a balance of creativity and technical expertise and measuring change.

Gareth: Thank you very much for your time, Lisa.

A summary of references discussed in this interview:

Solutions journalism

Refer to this [Solutions Journalism Network](#).

Examples of programmes that take a solutions-based approach to journalism:

[BBC World Service - People Fixing The World](#)

[BBC World Service - The Climate Question - Downloads](#)

Examples of guides for journalists as an insight into how to present academic information in ways that meet their needs:

[Climate Solutions Reporting Guide](#)

[Rewriting Climate Journalism: Bridging the Gap Between Science and Audiences - iMEdD Lab](#)

Media forums

A few thoughts:

[The Reuters Institute launches the Oxford Climate Journalism Network to help journalists cover the climate crisis better | Social Sciences Division](#)

[Home - albert](#)

[Arena Climate Network - Arena for Journalism in Europe](#)

[Earth Journalism Network](#)

[Climate Change - IFJ](#)

Examples of risk communication with measured impact:

[Disaster Risk Communication Hub: Case studies | PreventionWeb](#)