

# OECD study of flood risk management. The Seine, Île-de-France. 2014

Analysis and recommendations on public policies to improve flood risk prevention in Île-de-France

## Alfonso Nájera Ibáñez

Deputy Manager for Studies and International Relations  
Consortio de Compensación de Seguros



© Bibliothèque historique de la ville de Paris (BHVP), G. Leyris,  
([http://ibytes.es/blog/inundaciones\\_de\\_paris\\_1910.html](http://ibytes.es/blog/inundaciones_de_paris_1910.html)) Creative Commons  
(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/es/>)

The **1910 Paris flood** not only produced serious damage but it had a profound impact on the collective consciousness at the time, bearing in mind the context of enthusiasm for great industrial progress in which it occurred. It is an event which always comes up as a reference point when conversation turns to the danger of the river Seine overflowing, not only as this affects metropolitan Paris but also the whole Île-de-France region (1). This is a 100-year flood which had forerunners that had made an exceptional impact, such as that which occurred in 1658 and preceded other floods that were substantial, though not as heavy, such as those in 1924 and 1955.

And every time when, within the context of a weather pattern of heavy, prolonged downpours, the Seine begins to rise above a certain flow level in the normal range, thoughts turn back to 1910 and the authorities go on the alert. With good reason.

Such concern is actually very understandable. One could pause to reflect on the extent of the potential damage of a flood such as that in Île-de-France in 1910 on virtually all levels: economic, social, cultural, political, etc., and of course just in human terms if

This flood affected five million citizens, specially the 830,000 people living within the area susceptible to flooding, where 55,700 companies are located.

All of this is without forgetting the major risk faced by a universal and priceless cultural heritage.

Also, the impact on the operations of companies would imply a toll of 400,000 job-losses.

An effective prevention policy must be based on a clear definition of the duties and obligations of each of the actors on the stage (institutions and public bodies on the various levels of government, the private sector and civil society), as well as on a coordination of these, backed by incentives, yet also sanctioning, mechanisms.

**The great urban sprawls must find a solution to strike a balance between developing and controlling vulnerability.**

one bears in mind that the region is really France's core. It is the most populated and wealthiest of the 22 administrative regions, bringing together some 19% of the population of France and accounting for 30% of national GDP (5% of EU's GDP). The government, most of the larger companies, and the major decision-making and research centres are based within this territory, which is also the world's top tourist destination and Europe's second most important focal point for attracting investment.

Against this backdrop, and considering that it is a type of slow flood, with the waters taking over for up to two months, an event such as the one in 1910 would have seriously disrupted the functioning of the machinery of the state and the institutions, as well as the financial, commercial and industrial sectors, and essential services and infrastructure (electricity, transport, water, the food supply, telecommunications, public safety, education, etc.) Some five million citizens would find their daily lives significantly affected, especially the 830,000 people living within the area susceptible to flooding, where 55,700 companies are located.

All of this is without forgetting the major risk faced by a universal and priceless cultural heritage.

In the worst-case scenario the direct economic damage could be as much as 30 billion euros, while the macroeconomic damage would mean a reduction in GDP (over a period of about five years) of up to 58.5 billion euros, which amounts to a cumulative 3%. In such an extreme case the impact on the operations of companies would imply a toll of 400,000 job-losses.

All of these are reference figures offered in this OECD study to emphasize the pressing need to establish the suitable strategies and public policy for action, in order to reduce in this region the flood risk in the medium and long term via preventive measures, stepping up resilience and reducing vulnerability. This is a goal that has thus far not been possible to achieve satisfactorily. The fact is that, as the study says, the great floods in megacities illustrate the difficulties experienced by societies in striking a balance between development and dealing with the vulnerability associated with the multifaceted exposure of social and economic stakeholders (page 36).

Protection-oriented efforts (structural measures) have been made since 1910, but investments in this sense have not been forthcoming in any great quantity in recent decades. Meanwhile, vulnerability has been exacerbated by the effect of increasing development activity, the building of critical infrastructure and the greater interdependence of all this, as well as the concentration of assets and people.

The book provides an analysis and recommendations regarding

public policy to enhance flood prevention in Île-de-France via the implementation of an ambitious and coherent strategy to manage flood risk in this territory. There is no shortage in France of legislation and schemes purpose-designed for the area of prevention, quite apart from other regulations particularly affecting this region of France, but they will not be wholly effective or become as efficient as they might be if special emphasis is not placed on governance.

The fact is that, as the study says, the great floods in megacities illustrate the difficulties experienced by societies in striking a balance between development and dealing with the vulnerability associated with the multifaceted exposure of social and economic stakeholders (page 36).

As it is said in the book, the response to a serious risk of flooding from the Seine in Île-de-France lies with adequate governance that would focus on harnessing the full battery of public policies in this area with a view to bolstering the resilience of this strategic territory (page 76, French version), via prevention policy that diminishes long-term vulnerability.

And if it is to be effective such policy must be based on a clear definition of the duties and obligations of each of the actors on the stage (institutions and public bodies on the various levels of government, the private sector and civil society), as well as on a coordination of these, backed by incentives, yet also sanctioning, mechanisms. The key points of governance concern the coherence of the legal and regulatory framework and the mandate of the institutions in the service of an established strategy in common, as well as the effective coordination and cooperation among the various stakeholders in executing this (page 76, French version).

The second chapter deals with governance, while the third centres on how to bolster resilience in Île-de-France via prevention, not only through using structural measures, where the problem of how to finance these has a decisive bearing, but also non-structural measures, highlighting the importance of awareness of the risk, evaluating it, disseminating information about it, and fostering a risk culture.

Chapter five is given over to funding efforts to enhance resilience, mentioning local and national means to do this. Notable among the former is the scheme for natural catastrophe compensation, created in 1982 and based on a system of reinsurance managed by CCR (Caisse Centrale de Réassurance), which is backed by the State guarantee.

To summarize, this is a study which uses a holistic approach in examining the problem of managing flood risk in a specific territory, in this case Île-de-France, but which represents a general challenge for all of the great urban sprawls, which must

find a solution to striking a balance between developing and controlling vulnerability.

---

**OECD (2014), *Seine Basin, Île-de-France 2014: Resilience to Major Floods*, OECD Publishing.**

**DOI: 10.1787/9789264208728-en**

*Number of pages: 220*

(Only available in French and English)

## NOTES

(1) Île-de-France is one of the 22 administrative regions within the territory of metropolitan France. Paris is located inside it, for which reason it is also known as the “Paris Region”.