

Communication of “Risk” and “Hazard”

BfR Project Description, 8 May 2009

For the purposes of the further development of risk communication, NGOs, trade and industry and public authorities in particular were to be interviewed about the subject “hazard” and “risk” in order to obtain information on their experiences with the use of both concepts and their expectations concerning their involvement in the risk assessment and risk communication process.

Project management agency

BfR

Department: Risk Communication

Unit: Risk research, perception, early detection, impact assessment

Co-operation partners

Institute for Ecological Economy Research (IÖW) (www.ioew.de)

Dialogik

Project term

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Funding agency

BfR

The use and handling of the terms “risk” and “hazard” were to be examined from various angles. Differences in the ways these terms were used had repeatedly led in the past to misunderstandings between the people involved in the communication process.

First of all a review of literature was undertaken in order to examine the different opinions held by the stakeholders concerning the use of the terms “hazard” and “risk”. Questionnaires were then drawn up which were handed out in anonymised form to informed representatives of research institutions, public authorities, NGOs and associations. They were asked to share their thoughts on prior experience in using these terms. The participants were also given an opportunity to make alternative proposals concerning participation in the risk communication process, the timeline for involvement and implementation, and to give a personal assessment (participatory process). In addition focus groups were held with between five and ten representatives broken down into the stakeholder groups – trade and industry, public authorities and NGOs.

Based on the results of the survey the project participants then elaborated, as the next step, proposals for five different management options which included discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of these options. Finally, a one-day colloquium was staged during which the project results were presented to and discussed by a selected circle of participants (roughly 100). This colloquium was also attended by representatives of NGOs, associations and other stakeholders (representatives of federal state and federal government authorities).

The literature review shows that the question about the different attitudes amongst stakeholders when it comes to understanding and using the terms “risk” and “hazard” has scarcely been examined at all up to now. There is hardly any specific research on this question in German-speaking and international research landscapes. When it comes to the language used by institutions, associations, public authorities and the public at large, the

terms “risk”, “hazard” and “danger are frequently used in the same way and there is no clear demarcation of these terms. The compilation of the definitions of the terms from the glossaries of some national and international institutions reveals that various disciplines like economics, sociology, environmental engineering, toxicology or epidemiology use the terms in different ways. Hence there is no coherence between the different scientific disciplines.

The empirical findings also indicate that there is no uniform understanding or uniform use of the terms “risk” and “hazard” by the various stakeholders.

The central findings of the empirical study were grouped in four “pillars for improved risk communication”. They concern

- the stakeholder dialogue in conjunction with risk assessment and management,
- risk-hazard contents,
- public authority communication of risks,
- handling risks.

The final report is available. It will be published shortly as a *BfR-Wissenschaftsheft*.