

The Responsibility of Politics in the Perception of Risk

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The body politic faces the difficult task in the future of assessing risks judged to be unacceptable by the public and suggesting solutions which not only make scientific and economic sense but which are also acceptable to society as a whole.

However, the interpretation of the concept of risk varies widely depending on time, place and circumstance. While some risks whose dangers have been extensively proven are tolerated and accepted, others with only potential and sometimes illusory consequences lead to reactions that are difficult if not impossible to control.

Therefore it is the duty of politicians, who decide how the limited available resources are to be allocated, to assess and weigh the different risks in order to prevent unjustified and costly demands.

The decision-makers have a particularly difficult position whenever there is no sound scientific answer with which to counter the concerned public.

This applies to everything associated with the effects of low doses and especially to fears arising from the effects of low radiation doses.

The lack of secured scientific results regarding the relationships between the radiation dose exposure and the appearance of cancers has, for example, led to an exaggerated assessment of risks that might result from the disposal of radioactive waste while the real problems lie in the area of the safety of nuclear facilities.

At a time when the world is called upon to master a rising demand for energy and grave environmental problems, the solutions afforded by nuclear power are delayed by measures coloured by distrust such as the constant lowering of radiation protection and release limit values.

Some groups and some countries in reality use the concept of risk of nuclear power to bring about the ban of this energy source and the cessation of research activity even if this would contribute to the improvement of safety.

Thus, for ideological reasons, it is possible that the real risks - such as the warming of our planet - are neglected in favour of an illusory aspiration towards zero risk.

The principle of prescribing safety measures increasingly loses its original meaning and finally becomes a principle with which to avoid decision-making entirely which could, in certain areas, lead to the paralysis of research and economic development.

This is why new ways of discussion and argumentation between experts, citizens and politicians need to be developed in future in order to establish reasonable behavioural norms towards risks.