



Going beyond science-based decision-making: a perspective from inside UK risk policy-making

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Science plays a major role in political decision-making concerning risks and hazards. It feeds into the analysis, the assessment, and also into the management of both natural and man-made risks and hazards. However, uncertainty remains very much part of both the process and the outcomes of political decisions concerning risks; and disasters such as, for example, the 1999 snow avalanche tragedy in Galtür, Austria, or the BSE crisis in Britain in the 1990s highlight the problems arising from risk management procedures solely based on science. While acknowledging the importance of scientific input into this process, this paper discusses the scope for policy-makers to venture beyond science and introduce alternative sources of knowledge and expertise.

In a first step, drawing on the results of research conducted in 2005 on risk perception of snow avalanches in the Tyrolean Alps, the author will establish the need for a more inclusive approach towards risk decision-making. Rather than understanding communication and deliberation about risks as a one-way, top-down process informed solely by science, it should be conceived as a multilateral dialogue between policy-makers, scientists, stakeholders, and members of the public. In a second step, discussing preliminary results of a current research project that situates the author within the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), the paper will analyse attempts in UK policy-making to integrate different kinds of 'social evidence' into a mainly science-based decision-making process. Defra's Nanotechnologies Policy represents a move towards a more dialogue-oriented approach to risk management. Through increasing the emphasis put on engagement with stakeholders and publics

and opening up to social scientific expertise, civil servants on the policy floor try to improve risk-based political decisions.

Key questions addressed in this paper include: What role can science play in risk decision-making and why does the process need to go beyond science and include other forms of expertise? What value does engagement with social science, stakeholders, and publics add to decisions concerning risks? What problems arise from the integration of scientific and social inputs into the approach? And how could the experience made at Defra be projected to other risk-based policy arenas?

Conclusions will be drawn which suggest that Defra's approach towards risk-based decision-making represents a good step in the right direction to increase the range of evidence that their policy is based on. However, it will also be shown that finding the balance between, and managing the integration of scientific and alternative types of expertise remains difficult. With this, the paper offers a valuable contribution to the discussion about the role of science in societal decision-making about hazards and risks. In looking beyond the scientific input into the policy-making process and analysing and discussing the value of alternative sources of knowledge and expertise, it adds another dimension to an important debate.