

Paris Risk Group

Fostering the use of social sciences in government organisations with responsibility for risk assessment and consideration of social science evidence to inform risk management.

Over the last two decades, national and European public authorities have been confronted with a multiplication of controversies, crises and scandals on issues related to food safety, occupational health and safety, and environmental health. Major institutional reforms were undertaken in order to improve organizational ability to govern issues such as genetically modified organisms and nanotechnology, chemicals in food, the environment or the workplace, or air quality. In particular, the creation of dedicated organisations in the field of risk assessment and/or management – many of which are independent of the political process – led to a significant improvement in risk regulation. Yet, there remains room for progress.

A key characteristic of many of the issues mentioned above lies in the fact that they involve a plurality of forms of knowledge. Although initially risk analysis or assessment was based on evidence from the biomedical, physical or natural sciences, the importance of the social sciences and humanities has progressively been acknowledged. As organisations have developed expertise in the social sciences, progress from this being a supplement to other evidence, to a more significant component of the evidence base, has been made. This can be witnessed within the different national organisations throughout Europe in charge of assessing risks related to food safety, occupational health and safety, and environmental health: all have increased the contribution made by social sciences in delivery of activities within their remit.

The Paris Risk Group brings together social scientists working for or with organisations involved in risk assessment and management. Its overall goal is to promote the use of social sciences alongside more traditional scientific disciplines; eventually to reconsider traditional procedures of risk assessment in order to integrate a wider range of evidence, including the social sciences. Its purpose is to exchange experiences relative to the use of social sciences in the production of risk assessments, in the broader context of risk management, and to share methods and tools and experiences across organisations.

The Paris Risk Group operates as a network of representatives of different organisations and of social scientists, involved or interested in food safety, occupational health and safety, and environmental health. It has the following functions:

- Identify and share best practices and ‘success stories’.
- Identify needs for further social research in relation to food safety, occupational health and safety, and environmental health.
- Build and maintain a network: identify relevant experts; collate information about organisations’ current work areas and individuals’ interests and expertise; and hold regular (annual) meetings.
- Create a pool of shared knowledge on methodology and tools.
- Communicate on the added value of introducing social science research in risk assessment and other activities within the remit of included organisations.
- Establish a ‘call for help’ function.
- Promote longer-term knowledge transfer on common topics.
- Identify, assess and eventually publish existing unpublished research.
- Bridge the gap between academic and agencies’ research.