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On: 12 June 2014, At: 06:00

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Journal of Risk Research

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjrr20>

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Published online: 01 May 2014.

To cite this article: Jan van Tol (2014): Dutch Risk and Responsibility programme. Some research into citizens' views on a proportionate handling of risks and incidents, Journal of Risk Research, DOI: [10.1080/13669877.2014.910691](https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2014.910691)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2014.910691>

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Dutch Risk and Responsibility programme. Some research into citizens' views on a proportionate handling of risks and incidents

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(Received 12 October 2013; final version received 11 March 2014)

The Dutch Risk and Responsibility programme has been studying and discussing the 'risk regulation reflex' since 2010. As the Dutch government aims at playing a smaller and more realistic part in dealing with risks, it is critical to know how citizens would view such a change. Or do they really demand the government to provide 100% safety, as often seems to be assumed by journalists, politicians and policy-makers? This article describes two studies into the attitudes of citizens towards safety risks and how the programme takes those insights on board. Research in the course of a year, combining quantitative and qualitative methods, found that the majority of respondents appeared to have a down-to-earth and rational attitude towards risks they voluntarily and even involuntarily face. These attitudes do however need to be addressed specifically. And when considering a policy response to a serious incident, the government does not necessarily have to take the strong initial emotion as a starting point. Instead, it can quite plausibly tune in to the public's down-to-earth attitude. A second study deals with the various perspectives citizens use when accepting risks. The general public tend to follow a broad scope of moral values when deciding on the acceptability of risks, whereas government tends to limit itself purely to risk reduction. When analysing citizens' perceptions of risk it is more important to question whether a risk is morally acceptable rather than focusing on the exact size of the risk. Technocratic argumentation only strengthens the moral need to reduce risks, as it disconnects risks from the moral reasons why we perhaps ought to take them. And, only the latter contains the key to achieve risk acceptance by the public.

Keywords: risk; safety; incidents

The Dutch Risk and Responsibility programme

In November 2010, the Dutch Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations started a policy programme aimed at developing a vision on government's role in regard to risks, as well as a set of tools for government to handle risks and incidents in a proportionate manner.

This Dutch Risk and Responsibility programme (DRRP) has studied and discussed the 'risk regulation reflex', which is a combination of the trend towards ever more far-reaching preventive safety measures which carry the chance of imbalance between the gain in safety and the costs and side effects, together with the pitfall of a hasty response following an incident leading to disproportionate measures.

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Disproportionality is a danger not only in legislation but also in regulation, norm-setting, implementation and in the responsibility attributed to government. And once a safety measure is introduced it is politically almost impossible to retract, no matter how inadequate or disproportional it turns out to be.

DRRP has researched several aspects of this phenomenon into which existing literature does not provide enough insight. Two of those studies are described below.

DRRP operates in an international network and has been building in particular on the pioneering work that the BRC and RRAC have carried out in Britain.¹ The programme runs until the end of 2014 and the results thus far were described last year in the *European Journal of Risk Regulation*.²

Problem statement

‘This must never happen again’. Statements like that are used frequently in the wake of a major disaster or following media attention to certain risks that society faces. Journalists, politicians and policy-makers seem to assume that citizens demand 100% safety and that the government should provide this. However, the research that this assumption is based upon may be too limited. The Dutch Council for Social Development recently noted; ‘Citizens who – predictably – loudly voice their concerns, appear on further questioning to have a more balanced view, particularly when shallow questions are avoided. When people are gathered within discussion groups their judgements are usually less strong and opinions often change as a result.’³

As it is the objective of the government to play a smaller and more realistic part in dealing with risks, it is critical to know how citizens would view such a change. Hence the research by DRRP.

Approach and results of research among the public

For nearly a year, from October 2011 until September 2012, citizens were asked about their expectations of government, businesses and themselves in dealing with safety risks and incidents. Which parties did they consider to be responsible for the control of voluntary and involuntary risks? What would this responsibility look like in practice and which government response should be appropriate when a risk materialises? A combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods were used to gather information. Three online ‘communities’, four focus groups, three flash polls and a multidimensional opinion poll were used to gather information. The research was conducted by TNS Nipo in collaboration with Veldkamp market researchers, and was first presented on 30 May 2013.⁴

The most important finding is that the majority of respondents appear to have a down-to-earth and rational attitude towards risks they voluntarily and even involuntarily face. These attitudes do however need to be addressed specifically.

On the one hand, simple, one-dimensional questions (as presented in the flash polls) provided a starting point from which opinions could be measured when people had no prior knowledge of and/or bias in respect of a particular issue. During this phase of the research, clear differences became visible between the general perception of risks and the specific perception. When respondents were asked how they face and perceive risks in general, most replied in a rational manner. When presented with the opportunity to avoid the risk, for example, through government

information about the nature of the risk and preventive measures, most respondents were of the opinion that they should be able to choose for themselves whether or not to accept that particular risk. However, even when no choice was provided, most respondents were willing to accept involuntary risks provided that the probability of occurrence was small. If there was a good level of protection, they did not find it necessary that additional countermeasures be put in place.

When asked about specific involuntary risks, respondents seemed to quickly prioritise their own safety above all other things including the financial cost of combating the risk in question. This change of heart might seem irrational, but it is easily explained. With one-dimensional questioning respondents tend to answer quickly and in their own interests.

A similar shift in thinking became apparent when people were confronted with risk policies following incidents. In general, respondents said that there should be equal treatment of victims in both minor and major incidents. Nevertheless, when presented with specific situations respondents strongly deviated from their initial opinion. When they were given more information regarding the actual costs and benefits of safety measures, an interesting reaction began to emerge. Respondents seemed to understand that safety cannot be absolute and that government is faced with difficult choices. The intense dialogue in the focus groups seemed to bring out the rational and even calculating character of respondents. It can therefore be concluded that the rational thinking of citizens should not be underestimated. To tap into this attitude, surveys about risk should not be presented in a one-dimensional manner but rather through an dialogue in which options and dilemmas can be openly discussed.

This research shows a significant difference between the uninformed citizen (flash polls) and the informed citizen (communities, focus groups and multidimensional polls). Complete and thorough public communication about risks is more productive than limited and reassuring communication strategies which try to avoid negative reactions. This insight has the implication could drastically change government risk-communication strategies, especially if government aims at rational decisions on aspects of risk.

When it comes to serious incidents and accidents, people's immediate reactions are often very strong and they tend to regard drastic action as self-evident. Surprisingly, the research indicated that citizens quickly regain their rational attitude, and certainly do not demand 100% safety. A well-balanced government decision on potential new safety measures after an incident seems to fit in with the opinion and expectations of a majority of people. This insight gives the government a choice. When considering a policy response to a serious incident, the government does not necessarily have to take the strong initial emotion as a starting point. Instead, it can quite plausibly tune in to the public's down-to-earth attitude.

Essay on moral arguments

The DRRP resulted from the Day of Risk conference in 2010.⁵ Following that conference, Michel van Eeten, professor of Public Administration and Internet Safety at Delft University of Technology, wrote an essay on the various perspectives citizens use when accepting risks. In his view, the general public tend to follow a broad scope of moral values when deciding on the acceptability of risks, whereas government tends to limit itself purely to risk reduction.⁶ Later, van Eeten analysed this

topic adding further case studies and a moral-philosophical perspective. His new essay was co-authored by Liesbeth Noordegraaf-Eelens, Jony Ferket and Maxim Februari and published in 2012.⁷

The essay challenges the common belief held by politicians, policy-makers and civil servants that citizens are risk averse by nature. This is found to be a myth, so when analysing citizens' perceptions of risk it is more important to question whether a risk is morally acceptable rather than focusing on the exact size of the risk.

Through numerous examples, the essay explores which factors contribute to making risks morally acceptable. Examples are provided in which citizens have rejected the presented risks. Several notorious risk cases are discussed, such as the euro crisis, HPV vaccination and food safety incidents. The research indicates that the framing of risks actually encompasses the underlying moral questions. Issues such as voluntary versus involuntary or equal distribution of risks and blame are not objective characteristics, even though they are frequently used in the political debate on risks.

Analysis of the underlying frames which are used to encourage risk acceptance gave some remarkable findings. Firstly, they often do not primarily discuss risk underlying frames which are used to encourage risk acceptance. They do not put safety first but rather emphasise other values, such as justice, freedom, courage, reciprocity or sovereignty. Secondly, the frames indicate – contrary to what policy-makers tend to believe – that this message of risk acceptance is not necessarily the most difficult message for the voting public. Thirdly, the frames are closely connected to each other. They can be grouped together into three dimensions of dealing with risk: calculating the size of the risk, dividing and sharing the responsibility, and reconciling ourselves to the fact that some amount of risk will always remain.

The research shows a tragic paradox. When the government attempts to convince citizens that a certain risk is acceptable, it often uses the argument of risk avoidance. But the emphasis on how small a risk is only enhances the implicit principle that less risk is always better. This argument is self-defeating. Technocratic argumentation only strengthens the moral need to reduce risks, as it disconnects risks from the moral reasons why we perhaps ought to take them. And only the latter contains the key to achieve risk acceptance by the public.

In contrast, the sparseness of political communication surrounding risks appears a contributing factor to the almost compulsive need to always further reduce risks. There seems to be an overwhelming consensus among Dutch politicians that risks should always be as small as possible. But this stance rolls out the red carpet for any party which promises the least amount of risk. No wonder that there is a widespread belief that citizens are unwilling to accept risks. In contrast to the political communication strategies, citizens themselves do however utilise a more varied collection of moral considerations when judging risks. Some of these considerations make accepting risk necessary, useful and at times even attractive to citizens. Politicians and policy-makers could use this insight in their communication about risks.

Conference 'citizens and risk', 30 May 2013

The results of both these studies were presented on 30 May 2013 during a conference with over 70 participants including local and regional public administrators, officials from six different ministries, academics and journalists.

Ronald Plasterk, minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, opened the conference by presenting several interesting dilemmas. He noted that science has taught us that people have a limited understanding of the statistical insights into risks with a small probability and a large effect. We therefore tend to perceive those risks as more significant than statisticians calculate, and in many cases this leads to the expectation that government should step in. Government is made up of people and therefore prone to over-regulating, in spite of long-standing efforts to make government smaller. On the other hand, the public are increasingly better educated and are very well able to make all sorts of choices for themselves. Might one solution be to give the public more room to do so? When local initiatives are successful and expand to something resembling a small pub or semi-organised childcare, the question usually becomes prominent for local government whether these initiatives can meet all applicable professional standards, such as health and safety. But how could we keep the responsibility with the local citizens without an immediate need for government oversight in these situations? The WRR's (WRR: Scientific Council for Government Policy) motto 'trust and let go' is a great rule of thumb in these situations. The minister stressed the need to find suitable ways to explore whether this is possible and hopefully avoid the risk regulation reflex in the future.

Some critical presentations were given by philosopher and writer Maxim Februari, professor Ira Helsloot and professor Charles Vlek. This stirred a lively panel discussion between Harm Taselaar (editor in chief of RTL Nieuws), Annemarie Jorritsma (mayor of Almere), Irene van Geest-Jacobs (member, The Hague city council), Corrie Noom (cabinet member, Zaanstad council) and professor Peter Kerkhof (VU University Amsterdam). Led by Sicco Louw (Communications director for the Interior Ministry) the participants discussed the role of the media in the perception of risks and the tendency of public administrators to consider risks to be a government responsibility. The public administrators responded that they are usually quite ready to say publicly that risks remain, but that their civil servants are usually more fixated on avoiding that message because they think risk acceptance is an unpopular stance. The journalist and the politician in the panel both agreed that they were usually focused on action after an incident, which they considered to be one of their prime tasks. But they did not think the government's response should always be new interventions.

The research findings correspond well with the experience of several public administrators. Johan van den Hout, member of the Provincial Executive of North Brabant, explained how the province was working towards less stringent regulation on environmental safety. He elaborated on a general tendency of increasing precaution. Compared with his own childhood he believed that children at play today are disappointingly restricted in their freedom. For example, children playing with hammers and nails unsupervised – perfectly acceptable in the nineteen-seventies – is now almost unthinkable without adequate supervision – a perfect example, he said, of over-regulation.

Carla Breuer, mayor of Werkendam, explained how her municipality came to the decision not to make it mandatory for citizens to evacuate in the event of a flood warning. Citizens will be informed about the risk in ways that suit them, and they can make their own choice either to follow the advice to evacuate or to remain in their homes and be self-reliant for three days. In her opinion, underlined by one of the polder inhabitants who presented his view at the conference, citizens should be allowed the option to accept certain risks. The last presentation was by Willem

Urlings, who shared his wide experience as mayor. In many cases, he said, he had been surprised by the rational character of citizens when it comes to issues with a safety aspect. Government should not withhold information or impose safety policies without proper consultation. He considered this attitude patronising and counterproductive. In his experience it was also unnecessary, because citizens were quite down-to-earth when you discussed matters realistically and on an even footing.

Further plans

Until now the focus of the DRRP has been on investigating and discussing the pitfall of disproportionate intervention in the field of physical safety. For the remaining period the focus will be on:

- Sharing the insights gathered so far, also among provincial and local authorities.
- Conversion of these insights into a Cabinet vision, and developing tools for public administrators and civil servants.
- Testing the insights in a number of policy fields.

Among the insights to be shared and tested are the findings about citizens and risk (as described above). The DRRP will organise dialogues in a number of municipalities on safety dilemmas such as housing in higher risk areas: on floodplains or the river side of a flood embankment, under high-voltage cables or close to factories which produce or use dangerous materials. The dialogues will be preceded by a public opinion poll which will be part of the discussion. These dialogues could lead to specific recommendations for local government.

The tools for public administrators and civil servants will be aimed at dealing with risks proportionately, especially under public pressure. They will take account of scientific insights and experiences of the proposed users, and will include:

- Ways of providing citizens clear insight into risks as well as an action perspective which allows them a choice.
- Ways to better understand the exact nature of societal concern surrounding risks.
- Comparative analysis of the policies of more or less comparable risks.
- Methods for including the moral dimension in risk policy and risk communication.
- Analysis of cases in which a disproportionate intervention was avoided despite political or media pressure.
- Summary of good practices.

Apart from these tools, the DRRP will also develop the Cabinet vision as promised to Parliament on the role and responsibility of the government in dealing with public risks and incidents. The vision will contain a number of principles as a practical frame of reference which can be used to create or maintain a proportional level of government intervention in matters where risk is involved.

The principal target groups for the programme are local administrators and top officials (at national and local level). Activities will also be set up for mayors and local council members.

The programme seeks interaction with the practicalities of policy-making. Several ministries, provinces and municipalities have shown an interest in the application of the insights suggested by the DRRP. For youth care, which is particularly vulnerable to disproportionate interventions, these insights might be especially useful. Since youth care is in the process of being devolved to local government at the same time as major cutbacks are implemented, it is essential that public officials understand how to deal with risks and how to react to incidents appropriately. The DRRP will develop a practical tool in collaboration with the ministry of Health, Welfare & Sport, the Ministry of Safety & Justice and the organisation of Dutch Municipalities. The DRRP's first activity in this field is an analysis of over reaction in youth care.

In the past, it has proved difficult for governments to relax their professional standards in fire safety, food hygiene or health and safety, even if this would create more leeway for valuable citizen initiatives that do not necessarily create more risk. Municipalities will be invited to experiment with this. An idea currently being explored is whether public or semi-public institutions, such as hospitals or youth care homes, could be given more freedom to interpret and implement national safety standards, provided that this improves their service without reducing the actual level of safety. In addition to this, public Internet dialogues will be organised as an expansion of the previous online communities that were part of the research completed by the DRRP in 2012.

The Netherlands is a pioneer in the field of deregulation. Reducing regulation has proved to be very difficult when it comes to regulation with a 'safety' label (or 'security', for that matter). The approach as sketched above offers opportunities to achieve more results in deregulating those politically difficult areas by opening the discussion on the cost-benefit ratio and on the public's attitude towards risk. The time seems right to broach the subject of unnecessary expenditure on what is essentially no more than symbolic safety.

A substantial proportion of safety regulation originates from EU legislation, so it is important to include Brussels in this debate. The topic of risk regulation may be introduced during the Dutch presidency of the EU in 2016. It is a topic which is connected not only to deregulation but also to good governance. Preliminary preparations are under way to stimulate this discussion.

Notes

1. For an analysis of that work see Adam Burgess and Donald Macrae (2012).
2. J. van Tol, 'The Dutch Risk and Responsibility Programme' in: *ibid*.
3. Raad voor Maatschappelijke Ontwikkeling (2013).
4. The research findings were further analysed by Helsloot et al. (2012).
5. The conference report is available in English.
6. The essay was published together with other essays and case studies in van Tol, Helsloot, and Mertens (2011), A slightly extended translation was published in EJRR: van Eeten and Bouder (2012).
7. Published in van Eeten et al. (2012).

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