

Risk Governance and Public Trust

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Introduction

This paper seeks to give an overview of debates about risk governance and consider how they have developed in the very different settings of Western and Chinese society. It argues that:

- Although the risks that most people in Western countries face during the course of their lives have diminished, concerns about risk and uncertainty in the life-course have grown stronger.
- Trust in authorities (both experts and political leaders) in the West has been declining for some time. Such trust is highly relevant to risk governance, which requires confidence in the advice of experts and in policies based upon such advice in order to deal with existing hazards and to develop policies which will meet emerging risks in technical and economic progress and in the environment effectively.
- Commentators argue that risk governance involves practical issues (how to tackle problems successfully or ensure that they do not arise) and legitimacy issues (public acceptance of the proposed policies). Those who locate the basis of trust primarily in the first area tend to stress the role of government in providing effective regulation based on good quality expert advice in building public trust. Those who place more emphasis on the second tend to direct attention to public engagement in risk governance as a foundation for trust. Concerns about legitimacy and about public engagement have become increasingly influential in Western debates about risk governance in recent years.
- China has experience unprecedented economic growth during the last three decades. Some developments (industrialisation, urbanisation, population ageing) resemble those in the West. Social and political traditions differ markedly. Risk governance is mainly pursued through authoritarian approaches within a framework of socialist democracy.
- The pressures of social change and economic progress, intensified in the current world recession, may generate pressures for reforms in risk governance that include more public engagement. However China is likely to pursue its own national trajectory in this field as in others.