Managing the Social Impacts of Change from a Risk Perspective

A major academic and policy conference in Beijing
15-17 April 2009

Context

The agenda of risks facing citizens and government in the modern world is changing rapidly. In their everyday lives, people and organisations respond to the risks they recognise and prioritize as important from their point of view, not to risks as objective facts. This applies to managers of complex systems, policy-makers dealing with disease, population change and planning and those managing business and enterprises or delivering public services like health care, just as much as to ordinary people. Only if policy-makers take seriously the range of ways in which people understand and address risk will they develop sustainable solutions in an increasingly plural world.

Drawing on social science expertise from China and the UK, this conference will consider what psychology, sociology, political science, economics and social policy studies have to tell us about the way people perceive and assess particular issues as risks and how they respond to them.

A number of writers point out that the agenda of risks confronting policy-makers and managers is influenced by the various ways people at all levels perceive and respond to risks:

- In analysing the various responses to risk, the cognitive heuristics, satisficing devices, mental models and other factors which mediate and influence risk perception (Weyman and Kelly, 1999; Thaler, 1992)

- Combining these to understand the processes which amplify or diminish social processes of the recognition of and response to risk (Pidgeon, Kasperson and Slovic, 2003)

- In charting out the consequent difficulties of devising systems to cope with the difficulties resulting from people's interaction in complex technical, environmental and social processes (Perrow, 1984; Pidgeon, 1997 and Vaughan, 1996)

- Others have shown how managing risks rather than achieving the initial goals of the enterprise has expanded to become a major and sometimes a dominant theme in the conduct of business, but by government and the corporate sector and business (Hood, Rothstein and Baldwin, 2004; Power, 2004)

- Family change, the need for social care and the impact of technical change and globalisation on the sustainability of employment means that many people

face new social risks at particular stages in the life course, although in many ways their lives are growing more comfortable and secure (Esping-Andersen, 1999; Taylor-Gooby, 2004)

- At a more theoretical level, a number of prominent figures have argued that risk and uncertainty have become increasingly central to the way we understand our lives in modern societies (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1994; Taylor-Gooby and Zinn, 2006)

The risk perspective on change emphasizes that responses to problems are strongly influenced by the social factors that influence what people recognise and priorities as the risks and uncertainties that face them.

The conference will focus on the contribution of social science research to understanding and managing a range of important social risks. The conference language will be in English.

References

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