

Scientific Committee on Health and Environmental Risks (SCHER)

Request for an opinion on possible improvements in risk assessment approaches in view of risk management needs and effective risk communication

1. Background

In accordance with the common Rules of Procedure of SCCS, SCHER and SCENIHR, the ICCG shall assist the Commission to achieve a high level of harmonisation in the risk assessment procedures and shall provide guidance to the Committees on methodological and procedural aspects.

At its meeting of 25 June 2009, the ICCG has considered a proposal, preliminarily discussed and formulated by the SCHER, for a review of risk assessment in view of better adaptation to risk management needs and more effective communication of risk-related issues.

The ICCG concluded that a joint working group of the three Committees should be established in order to proceed to such review and produce an opinion, based on an appropriate definition of the terms of reference and of the working procedure.

2. The issue

Current approaches to the assessment of health and environmental risks frequently result in a variety of technical expressions of risks, based on consideration of endpoints, biological responses or other technical parameters that are sometimes only very indirectly related to the protection objectives pursued by risk managers and policy makers.

On the other hand, in posing the questions risk managers do not always provide an appropriate framework, notably by specifying the protection policy objectives in a manner that would allow the risk assessors to deliver outputs that are readily usable and leave no room for misinterpretations.

As a result, interpretation of expressions used in risk assessment reports may be problematic for risk managers and the public, open to misunderstanding and distortion, and difficult to communicate.

Moreover, risk assessment reports rarely address in a direct, systematic and transparent way the risk and, where it is possible to express risk and benefits by an appropriate metrics, risk-benefit balance issues which may arise in the specific cases examined.

Finally, risk assessment methods, procedures and expression of results are rarely co-ordinated with the cost-benefit or, more generally, multi-criteria assessment that risk managers and policy makers also need to inform their decisions.

A crucial challenge in this process is the possibility (still to be determined) to establish and standardise approaches and methodologies to measure and quantify risks, benefits and costs so that weighing of these parameters in the risk assessment and risk management processes can be done in a comparable and meaningful manner.

As a result of the lack of such approaches, comparisons of non-standardised parameters (e.g. potential health benefit versus socioeconomic costs) vary considerably depending on the underlying assumptions used thereby limiting the value of these comparisons in policy making.

Risk assessors often fill the gap between the technical parameters resulting from the process (e.g.: a margin of safety) and the risk managers' questions by "interpreting" themselves the risk assessment through more or less conventional expressions for "grading" the risk. When that happens outside a pre-defined and agreed scheme to frame risk expression, misunderstandings and confusion of roles are possible.

3. Terms of reference

Regarding the procedure, the ICCG is invited to co-ordinate the establishment of a joint Working Group including members designated by SCCS, SCHER and SCENIHR as well as, as appropriate, advisors from the pool and/or external experts in the relevant disciplines.

The Working Group should be given the tasks of:

1. reviewing the current risk assessment practices,
2. exploring the needs of risk managers and other stakeholders
3. identifying approaches that can provide results which are based on the best available science, informative, consistent, transparent and easy to interpret and communicate.

In doing so the Group, should evaluate current approaches to quantify and express risks, benefits, and costs, and if possible make recommendations for the development of standardised approaches which would optimise the value of such assessments.

2. Deadline

June 2011