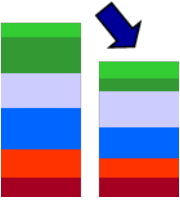


How can authorities deal with public risk?

Donald Macrae

12th February 2025, Vilnius

Risk and Regulation Advisory Council, UK

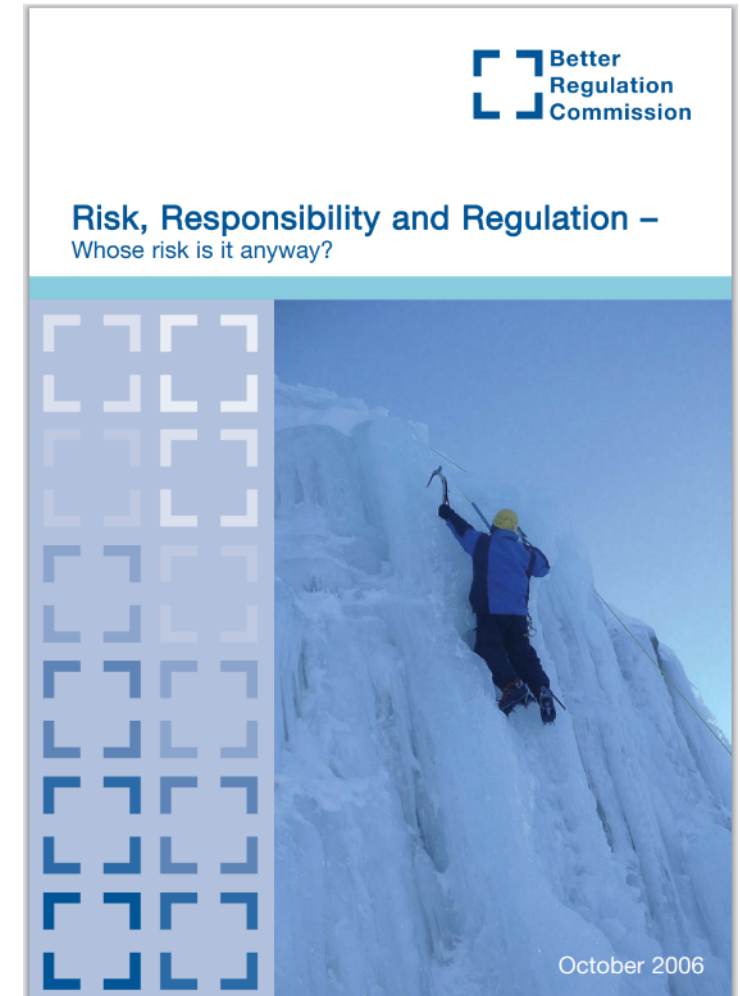


The UK's Better Regulation Commission's 2006 "Risk Report" was a seminal exploration at government level of the tendency for politicians to respond to public tragedies with bad regulation – "Tombstone Regulation".

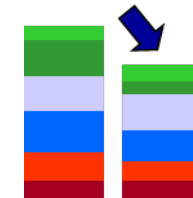


The Commission was replaced in January 2008 with the Risk and Regulation Advisory Council as an external expert panel to challenge government on this tendency. It reported finally on May 2009.

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/european-journal-of-risk-regulation/article/abs/an-experimental-offensive-against-the-mishandling-of-risk-in-society-reflecting-on-the-pioneering-work-of-the-risk-and-regulation-advisory-council-in-the-uk/A3667CB3F6F476F41896A2F83637BB64#>



The “Risk Landscape”

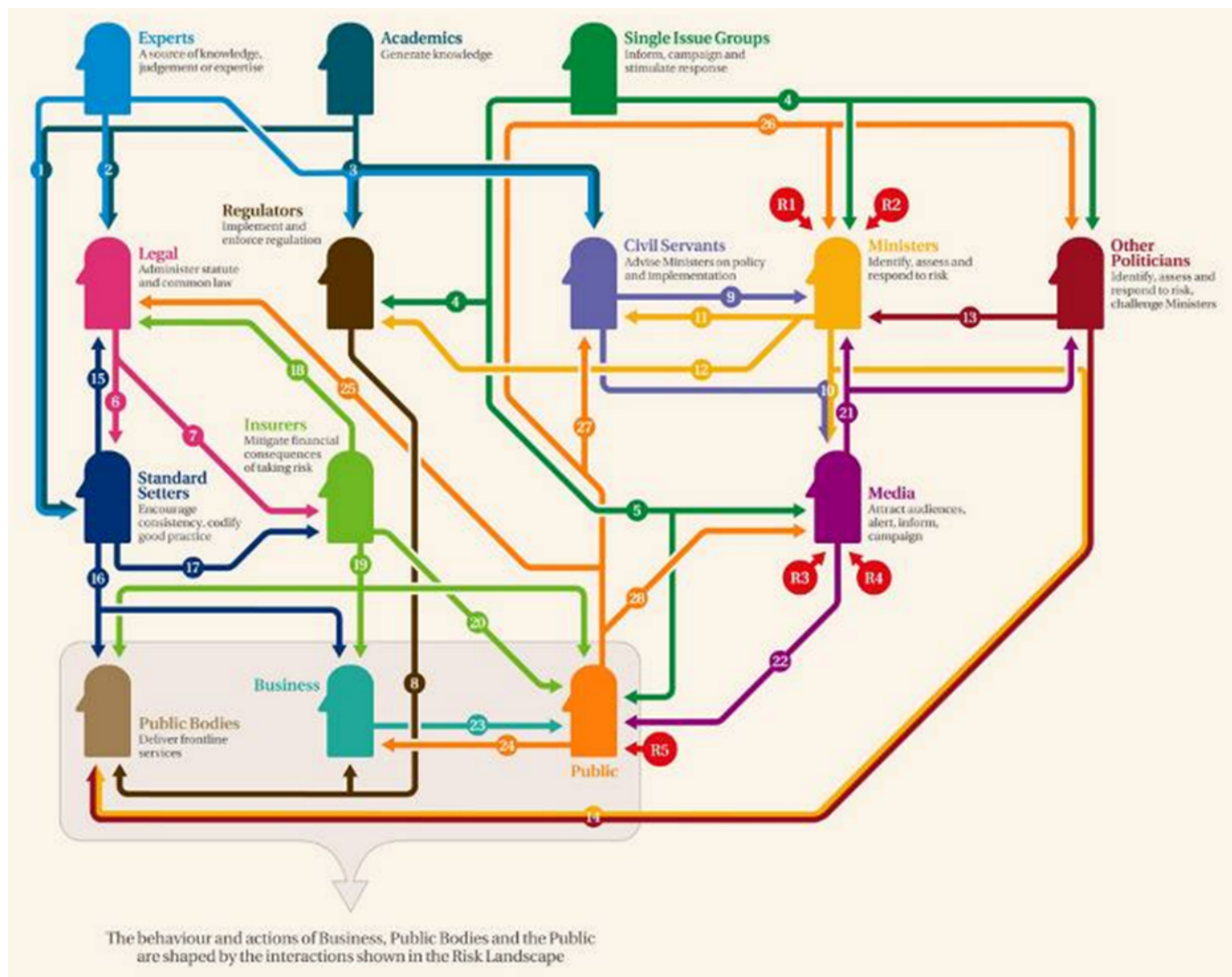


Public Risk was defined as:

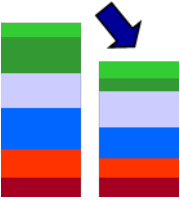
those risks that may affect any part of society and to which government is expected to respond

The RRAC took a systems approach to “Public Risk”, identifying “risk actors” involved in a complex set of interests and relationships, going well beyond just Ministers and officials.

This put policy development into a much more political context than an evidence-based approach to new regulation but the public anxiety that defined “public risk” made that necessary.



The Dutch “Risk and Responsibility” Programme



The main achievement of the RRAC was to inspire the Dutch Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations to build on its work in their “Risk and Responsibility” programme which ran from the “Day of Risk” conference in May 2010 for five years.

It worked at both national and local levels of government, analysing regulatory responses to tragedies and trying to help politicians manage these cases better.

The programme coined the term “Risk Regulation Reflex” (RRR) to refer to what was seen as an automatic political response to public anxiety - defined as *“the pitfall of disproportionate government safety interventions following an incident or publication of a risk”*

The output of the programme was a toolkit on various aspects of managing the “RRR”, aimed at national and local politicians and at citizens.

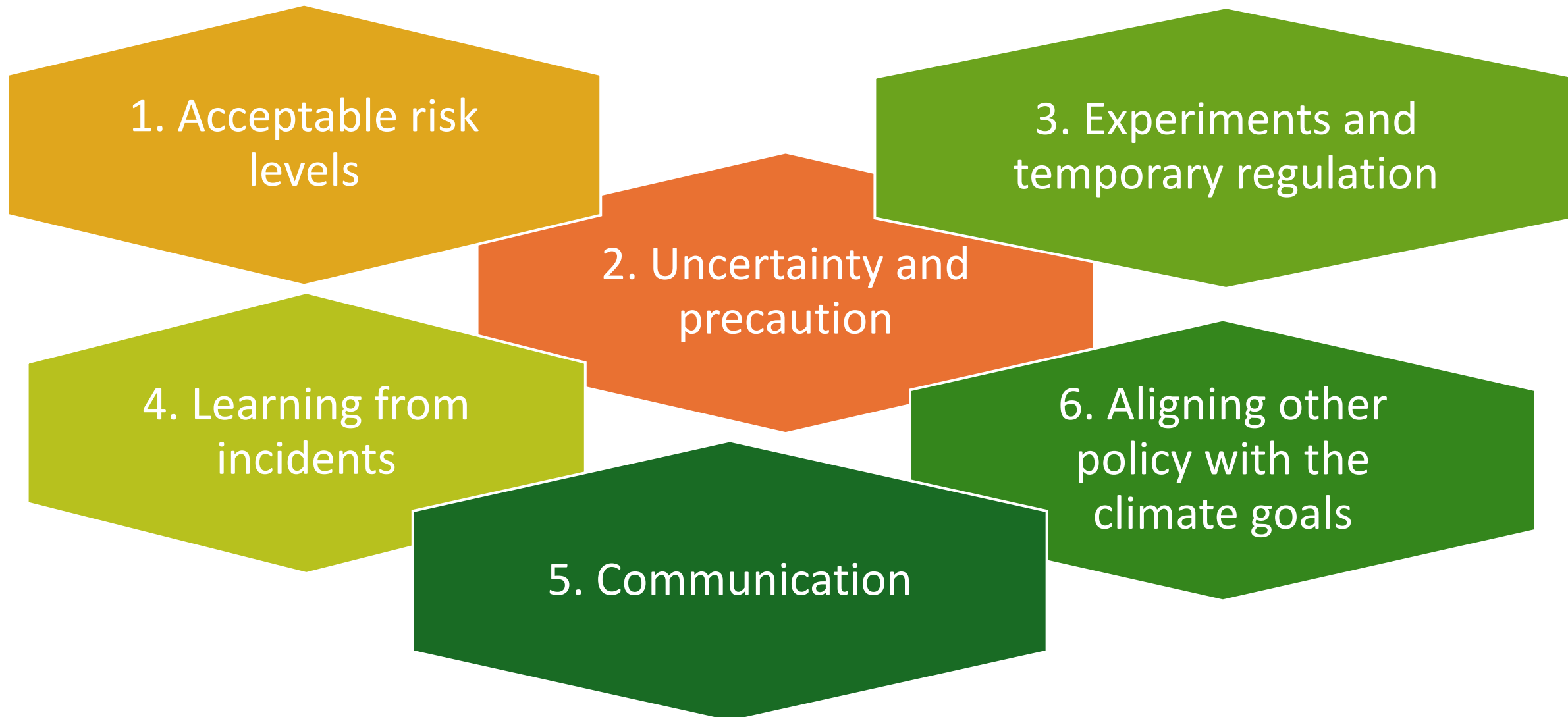
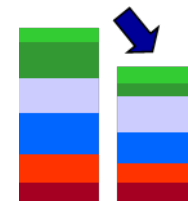


Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en
Koninkrijksrelaties

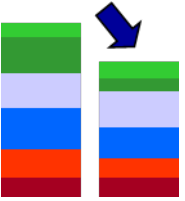


Illustration: Sebe Emmelot

Dutch Risk Policy Principles for the Energy Transition



Where does all this leave us?

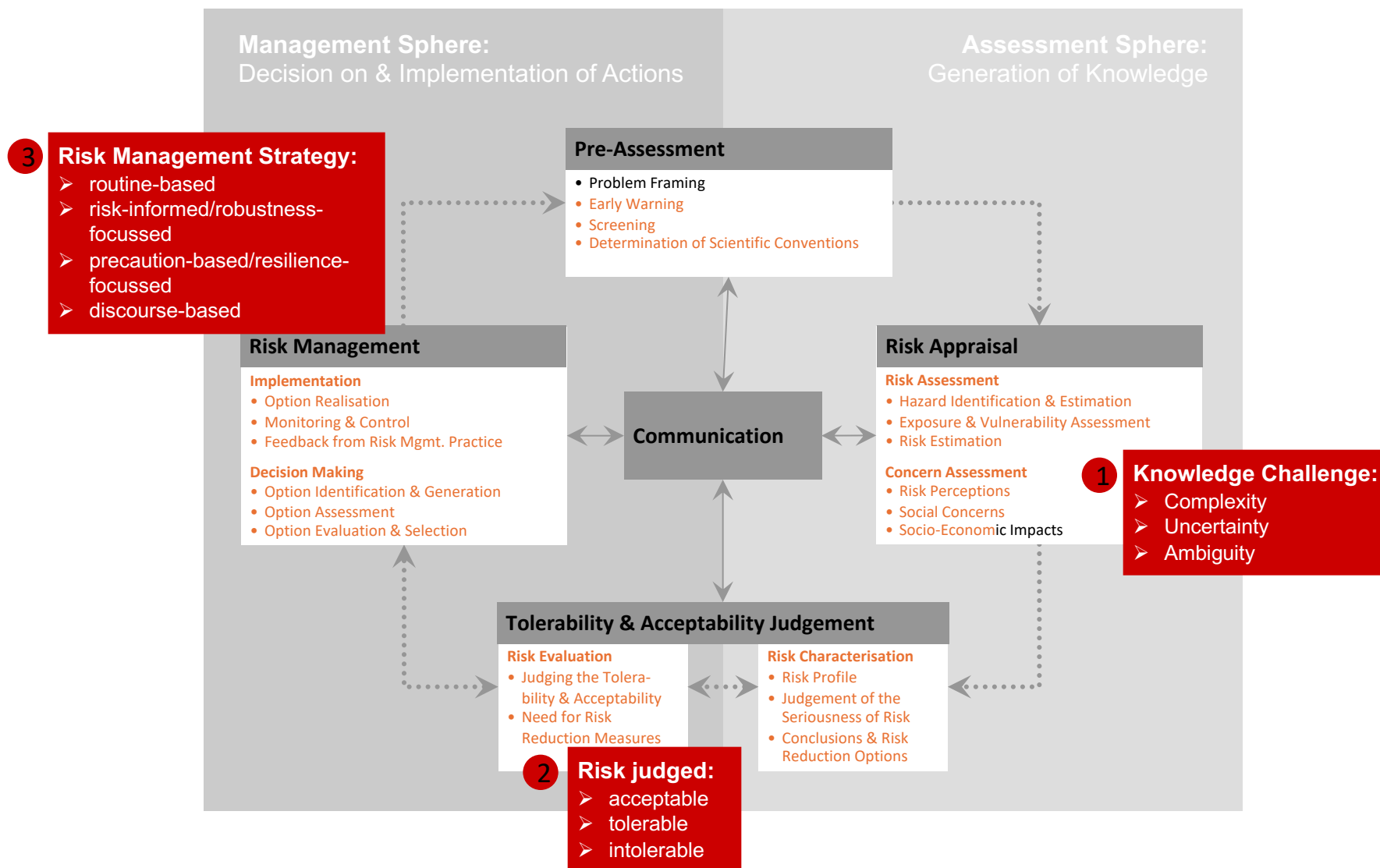
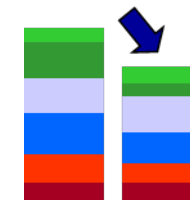


There is now a body of learning and there are tools for managing the political realities of responding to high public anxiety. How to apply this is still a difficult issue.

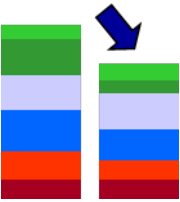
One tool is the “concern assessment” which can be developed in parallel to a risk assessment and is essentially an assessment of political risk, based on an understanding of the nature and level of public anxiety. This treats the issue of public anxiety itself as a parallel but separate problem from the causes of the disaster and its consequences.

In a democracy, decision-makers will be strongly influenced by public opinion and that may be driven by non-rational, unscientific thinking and, increasingly, misinformation. The politicians need advice on what is happening in that context as much as they need scientific advice on the causes of the disaster.

IRGC risk governance framework



Concern Assessment



In the IRGC model, there is a parallel process of assessing risks and assessing public concerns about the issue.

The issue may exist **only** at the level of concern.

The issue may exist **also** at the level of concern.

Consequences that flow from the crisis may be influenced by the concerns, rather than the concrete actions, e.g. the government doesn't care.

The concern may be a weak signal of a deeper issue that has been missed.

Risk Appraisal

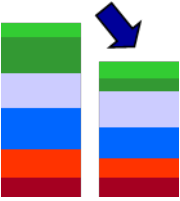
Risk Assessment

- Hazard Identification & Estimation
- Exposure & Vulnerability Assessment
- Risk Estimation

Concern Assessment

- Risk Perceptions
- Social Concerns
- Socio-Economic Impacts

Resolving the concern



Risk assessment and concern assessment are parallel processes at the same stage. They are followed by a judgement that the risk is:

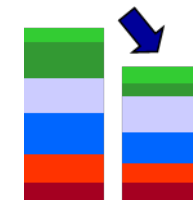
- Acceptable (so no action)
- Tolerable (but some reduction needed)
- Unacceptable (requires action)

The appropriate response to the public's concerns is a Political Statement, which is based on values or emotions and gives leadership.



In response to the London bombings in 2005, Blair said simply “London remains open”. It was a call for stability and normality, i.e. values, not actions.

Links to Materials



BRC Risk Report -

http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20100623194820/http://archive.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/brc/publications/risk_report.html

UK Risk and Regulation Advisory Council -

<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20100104183913/http://www.berr.gov.uk/deliverypartners/list/rrac/index.html>

Dutch Risk and Responsibility Programme – <http://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/kwaliteit-en-integriteitoverheidsinstanties/documenten-en-publicaties/publicaties/2014/06/24/dutchrisk-and-responsibility-programme.html>

Risk Regulation Reflex - <http://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten-en-publicaties/publicaties/2014/10/08/dealing-with-the-risk-regulation-reflex.html>

Concern Assessment - <http://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/kwaliteit-en-integriteitoverheidsinstanties/documenten-en-publicaties/rapporten/2014/06/19/managing-a-political-crisis-after-a-disaster.html>