

Challenges of Risk Communication in Food Safety and Proposals for Improvement

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Risk communication is one of three key components of food safety risk analysis. Reciprocal communication is needed in the process where scientific evidence is required for decision making. The necessity of communication between risk assessment and risk management has been recognized. According to several studies, risk analysis has suffered from communication weaknesses. The aim of the research was to identify the main difficulties of communication during the risk analysis process and to find suggestions for improvement.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Risk managers (RM, n=16) and risk assessors (RA, n=16) were interviewed in Finland, Sweden, Germany and the Netherlands. The interviews consisted of multiple choice, slider rating scale, Likert scale, and open-ended questions (53 questions).

RESULTS FROM CLOSED-ENDED QUESTIONS

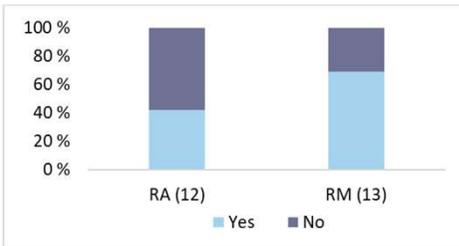


Fig. 1: Answers to the question: "Do you think that risk managers can describe their needs clearly for risk assessors understand what they need?"

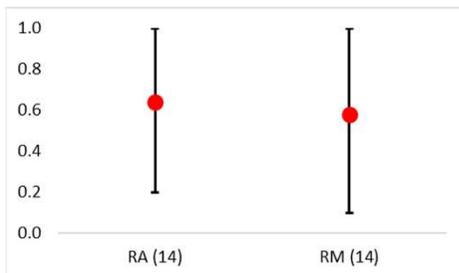


Fig. 2: Answers to the question: "Are the final risk assessments sufficiently clear to support decision making without need for additional interpretation?" Slider-rating scale: never (0)- always (1).

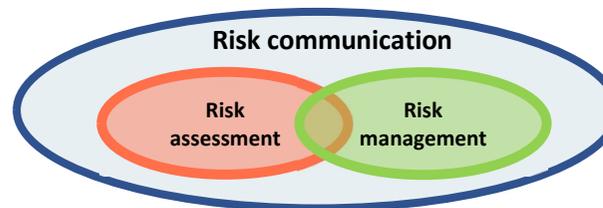
The mean answer is marked with a dot, and the range of the answers with a black line.



RESULTS FROM OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

- Framing of the risk assessment questions could be eased especially by dialogue between risk assessors and risk managers (RA 46%, RM 73%).
- When asked about measures that promote an efficient conduct of risk assessment, good availability of data (RA 44%, RM 53%), good communication between risk assessors and risk managers (RA 31%, RM 53%), and the clarity of the risk question and goal of the project (RA 25%, RM 33%) were most often mentioned.
- When risk assessment is finished, the communication and further assistance are needed in understanding the scientific details of the report (RA 79%, RM 44%), and in understanding the results and how they were derived (RA 50%, RM 50%).
- Personal assistance (RA 60%, RM 75%) and risk assessment presenting risk management options (RA 20%, RM 25%) were mentioned when the most convenient way of assistance was asked.
- Comprehensibility of the risk assessment results could be improved by making the risk assessment reports clearer and more readable (RA 54%, RM 47%), educating risk managers to understand the concepts of risk assessment (RA 31%), intensifying the dialogue before and during the risk assessment process (RM 27%) and when the uncertainties are clearly described (RA 23%, RM 13%).

Fig. 3. The connection between risk communication, risk assessment and risk management according to Codex Alimentarius.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- Risk assessment policy should incorporate the risk communication, considering the roles of risk assessors and managers while guaranteeing their independence.
- The mandate given by risk managers to risk assessors should be clear and in written form.
- Open and transparent dialogue crucial to good communication should take place along the process enhancing understandability and usability of risk assessment.
- Uncertainty and its causes should be properly described for risk management to maximize the effectiveness of communication.
- Building and maintaining trust as an essential element for effective risk communication is a mutual responsibility.



The interview study was part of the COMRISK project conducted by SVA from Sweden, BfR from Germany, WUR from the Netherlands and Finnish Food Authority. The project was funded by EFSA Partnering Grant: GP/EFSA/AFSCO/2017/01-GA05. The topic will be further studied in EFSA Partnering Grant project ENCOMRAN.