

BACKGROUND AND SOME GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

The countries of Latin America and the Caribbean are in a period of transition toward a culture of citizen participation. This implies that public institutions responsible for reporting to social sectors on the process and results of their activities must show transparent accounts and promote participatory activities.

The concern regarding environmental risks that can affect health on a daily basis increases the public's demand for information and puts greater pressure on authorities to take into account the population that is affected by their decisions.

Under these circumstances, it would seem that a valuable conclusion conducive to success is that the programs to be executed should be designed jointly by the government and the people working together from the outset. This will involve anticipating conflicts and preparing to face them. Methodologies will have to be developed that will build bridges between government authorities in charge of health and the environment and the different social sectors in order to establish effective lines of communication and participation for the management of environmental risks.

Concept of risk communication

Risk communication has evolved from the field of risk analysis and thus has a limited basis in the field of communications as such. Risk communication has been defined as an interactive process of an exchange of information and opinion among individuals, groups and institutions. It involves multiple messages about the nature of risk and other messages (not strictly about risk) that express concerns, opinions, or reactions to risk messages or to legal and institutional arrangements for risk the management of risk.

The purpose of the interaction and exchange of information about threats to health, safety and the environment is to make everyone aware of the risks to which they are exposed and encourage them to participate in minimizing or preventing these risks. The sharing of information and opinions makes for a better understanding of the risk and of the decisions to be taken in that context.

Since risk communication is associated with public health, it has also been developed in the field of sanitation and the environment.

It is important to identify risk communication as a process of interaction and exchange of information and opinions among individuals, groups and institutions from three standpoints:

1. As a tool for the development of skills, either of the intervening group or of the affected population.

2. As a phenomenon in itself occurring in the groups or institutions involved or as a phenomenon in the communication flows typical of the social organization.
3. As a strategic proposal that considers the administration of external and internal communication flows, in order to achieve a common direction as expressed in the goal of an intervention program.

Stages of evolution of risk communication

Over the past 20 years, authors have recognized that the evolution of risk communication has passed through seven chronological stages, which are characterized by strategies of focal communication recognized as effective by their practitioners. The evolution is marked by the progress of each approach. The successive stages build on one another, but they do not replace one another.

Stages of development of the risk communication

- All we have to do is get the numbers right
- All we have to do is tell them the numbers
- All we have to do is explain what we mean by the numbers
- All we have to do is show them that they've accepted similar risks in the past
- All we have to do is show them that it's a good deal for them
- All we have to do is make them our partners
- All of the above.

Fischhoff, 1998

As we can see from this wry depiction of the history of risk communication, facts and perceptions, and both empirical and non-empirical data help form public judgment on risk issues. It has been suggested that in an ideal project, risk management should be guided by facts alone; facts concerning not only the sizes of the risk and benefits involved, but also the changes in the political and social status that arise from the risk management process.

According to Covello and Sandman, risk communication has evolved in four stages:

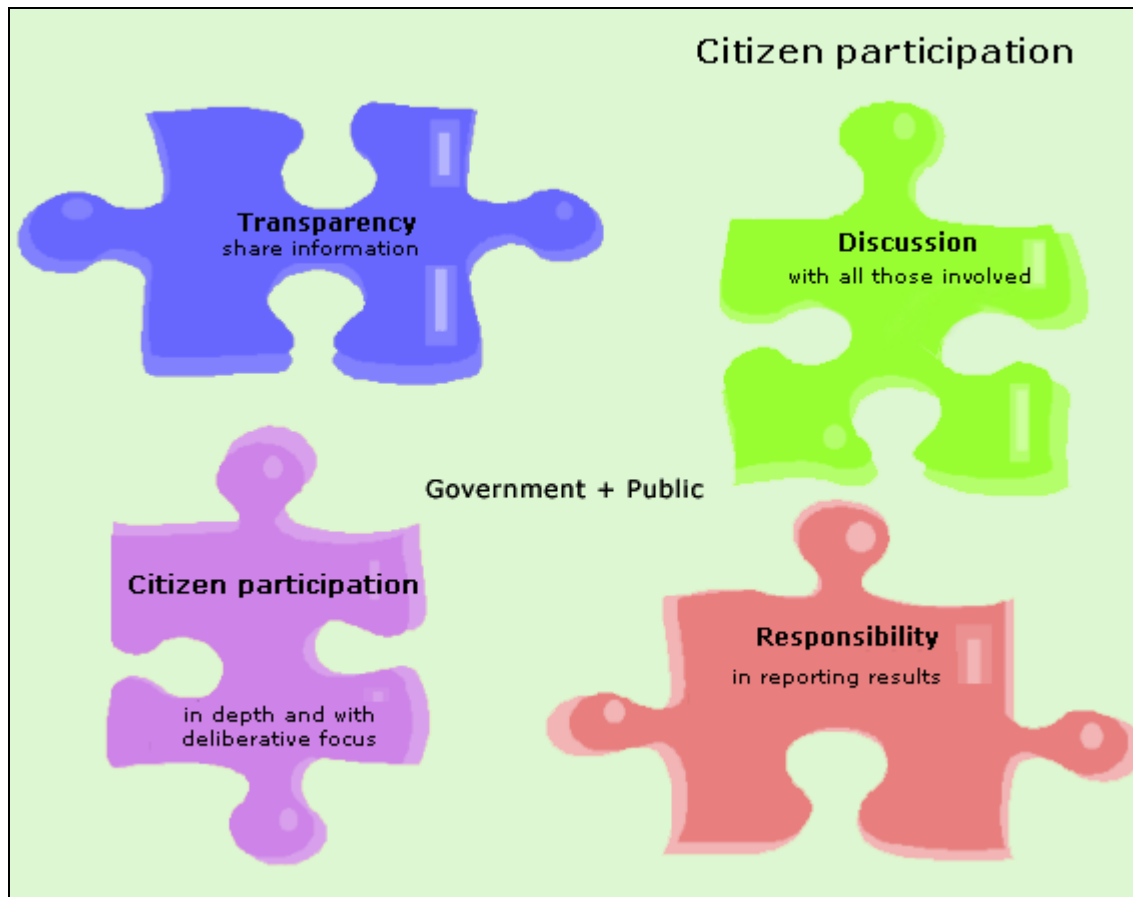
Stage 1: Ignore the public

Stage 2: Explain the risk data better

Stage 3: Dialog with the community

Stage 4: Involve the public as a cooperating partner.

What both the above lists of stages include is the importance of the citizens as legitimate, necessary, obligatory and irreplaceable cooperating partners.



Source: Canadian Food Inspection Agency

Elements of a plan for risk communication

When drawing up a plan for risk communication, we need to consider four principal elements:

1. The source
2. The message
3. The media
4. The audience or community.

The Source

The success of risk messages has been shown to be linked closely to the trustworthiness or credibility of the message source (risk communicator) in the eyes of the message recipient. Under certain circumstances it will be necessary to deal with a problem of loss of credibility of the source; once credibility is lost, it is very difficult to regain.

Studies have shown that medical sources are seen as being more expert and knowledgeable about risk and that they have greater freedom to present information to the public. Medical sources are also seen to have greater concern for public

welfare, greater responsibility, and a better track record for providing information. Elected authorities, governmental institutions and politicians are the sources with the least credibility. It is therefore important to work with the decision makers on the elements of risk communication in order to increase their credibility among the general public. Remember that a person who transmits risk information to the public must be a professional of great honesty and integrity.

Sources of risk information, including government sources, need to understand that trust is a critical factor for the acceptance and effectiveness of risk messages.

The message

In spite of the complexity of risk information, most information on environmental health can be easily understood if it is transmitted in a simple way and in terms that any citizen can grasp to get an idea of what risk really means and how he or she can participate in his or her personal protection.

The first step is to become familiar with the audience in order to identify a) what they already know; b) what they want to know; c) what you want them to know. Regardless of their level of knowledge, it is important to establish a rapprochement with the audience as soon as possible.

The media

The media play an important role in risk communication, since they are the mechanism whereby the message reaches the target audience. An objective decision concerning the type of media that will participate in a risk communication program is therefore essential.

The mass media are one of the principal sources of information for public perception of risks (see the chapter on *Risk Perception*). The media decide what to communicate and how to do it. The elements that come into play are mainly visual images, verbal support, tone, timing, and duration. The media generate context, that is, public opinion but not consensus, since the latter has to do more with interpersonal communication.

The audience

The audience is defined as the social group to which the message is directed. This audience may or may not be affected by the event, but is interested in it anyway. The audience may be diverse, ranging from the general public to specific or high risk groups that need to be protected.

A public that feels committed thanks to its awareness (resulting from good communication) can often help gather information that will help in the technical analysis of the risk.

Work with the audience is explained in the chapter on *Community Participation*.

Situations requiring risk communication

1. **Crisis:** At times of crisis, communication plays a key role when deciding how best to deal with the situation. First of all, the spokesperson should be a professional prepared not only to deal with the media but also to act as liaison with the emergency-response institutions, the government (local or national), and the affected population. All this implies that the manner of communication must be clear, easy to understand, informative, and accurate, using non-abstract (concrete) language.

It is important to define clearly who will be the official source of information in order to reduce uncertainty and establish credibility in public opinion, since the source of communication must be perceived as credible and trustworthy.

2. **Care:** Care must be taken when giving a specific recommendation to a population or group to modify their behavior in order to reduce exposure to a hazardous agent and protect their health.
3. **Consensus:** This refers specifically to the taking of decisions and it is here that large population groups or society in general should receive information about risk communication; for example, to prevent problems with radiation if a nuclear power plant is being installed.

In the evolution of risk communication there are myths that often detract from the communication and prevent its implementation. It is relevant to take these myths into account, not only to avoid them, but also to define strategies to counteract them.

Myths that prevent risk communication

- We have neither enough time nor resources
- It is more likely that we will alarm people
- If only we could explain the risks clearly
- We should not inform the people until solutions are available
- This is too difficult for them to understand
- Technical decisions are for the technicians to make
- It's not my job
- If you give them an inch, they'll take a mile
- It's the activists' fault

In risk communication the importance of following certain guidelines has become apparent. These guidelines ensure more successes than errors in the communication of the pertinent information on the part of all concerned: official spokespersons, the media, and the affected and spectator population itself.

DO's in risk communication

- Evaluate and improve your communication habits
- Share the responsibility in communication
- Concentrate and be alert
- Understand the meaning of what they tell you
- Observe all non-verbal signals
- Adopt an accepting attitude
- Express understanding and comprehension
- Listen to yourself

DON'Ts in risk communication

- Don't confuse listening with remaining silent
- Don't merely pretend to listen
- Don't interrupt unnecessarily
- Don't make hasty judgments
- Don't make the discussion a matter of vanity
- Don't ask too many questions
- Don't say *I know exactly how you feel*
- Don't overreact to expressions of emotion
- Don't give advice unless asked
- Don't hide behind the role of listener

Most practitioners of risk communication will agree that, even when effectively applied, risk communication will not solve all problems, nor will it avoid conflict on issues. Nevertheless, the contrary could be worse: poor or absent risk communication will undoubtedly lead to a failure to manage risk effectively.

Participatory approaches to risk communication may lead to better consensus but cannot guarantee absolute harmony. From the perspective of government, risk communication respects the public (by being participatory) and its right to know (by being as transparent as possible) while also appreciating the limitations of responsible government.

Components of risk communication

Three essential components of risk communication are trust, perception, and the important factors that mold public perception which may be described as “dread values”.

Trust

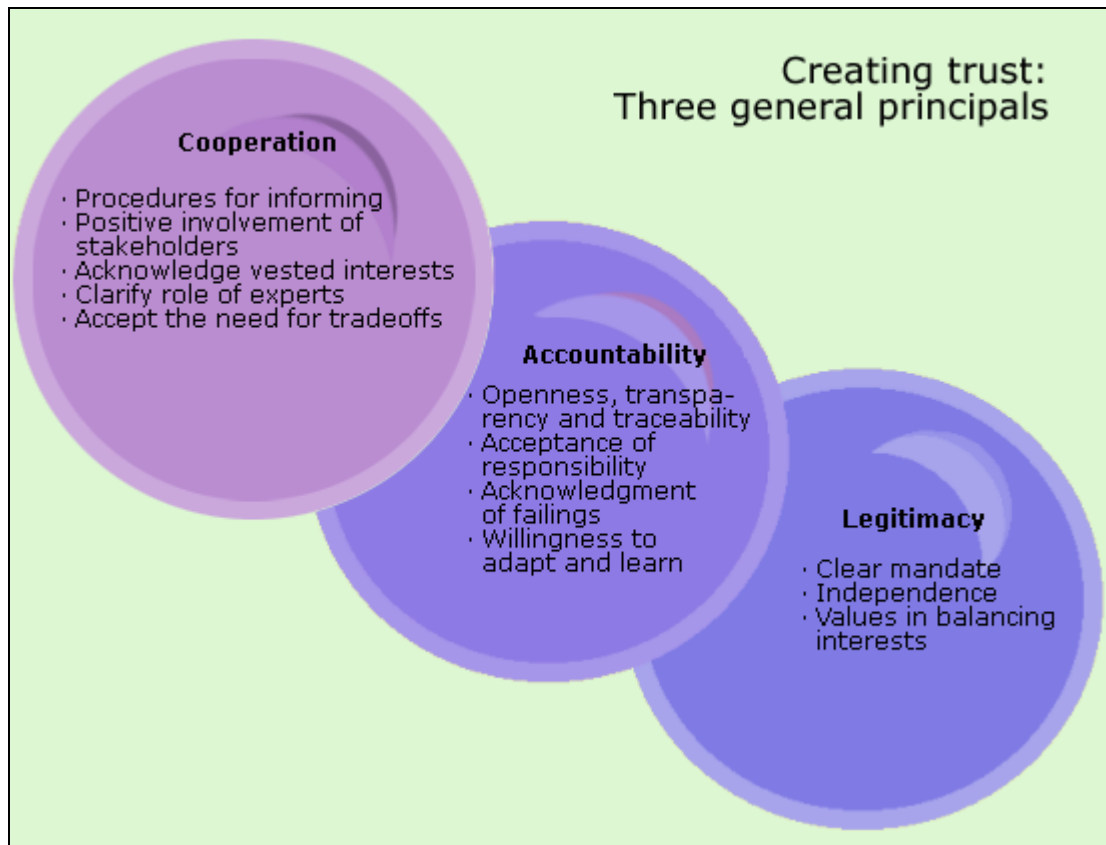
Of the three components of risk communication discussed in the following sections, trust is the most important factor in determining the effectiveness of risk communication. It is characterized by the presence of perceived competence, objectivity, fairness, consistency and good will.

Risk information sources, such as government, need to understand that trust is a very important factor in the acceptance and effectiveness of risk-based messages to the public.

Most research confirms that government is in fact considered by the public to be a less-than-trusted source of risk information. The public tends to view government risk-based information as distorted, biased and probably incorrect. The memory of wrong government decisions about risk tends to linger in the public consciousness, adding fuel to the skepticism.

In spite of that distrust, the public wants and needs to trust in its decision-makers and regulators. In today's society people and organizations have few options but to trust the systems in place to address hazards, simply because many hazards cannot be dealt with by the individual. Establishing a trusting relationship with its audience and, more important, continuing to maintain it, is becoming one of the major tasks of government communicators.

The importance of a trusted source of messages is related to two common categories of hazard: lifestyle hazards and emerging technologies. Research has shown that lifestyle hazards (such as those associated with food handling practices) are more likely to be accepted when information is provided by a highly trusted source such as the medical profession. Messages about technological hazards (such as those associated with biotechnology) face different challenges. In the case of a technological hazard, persuasive messages from a less trusted source have in fact been shown to have a negative effect on the recipients' acceptance of the message.

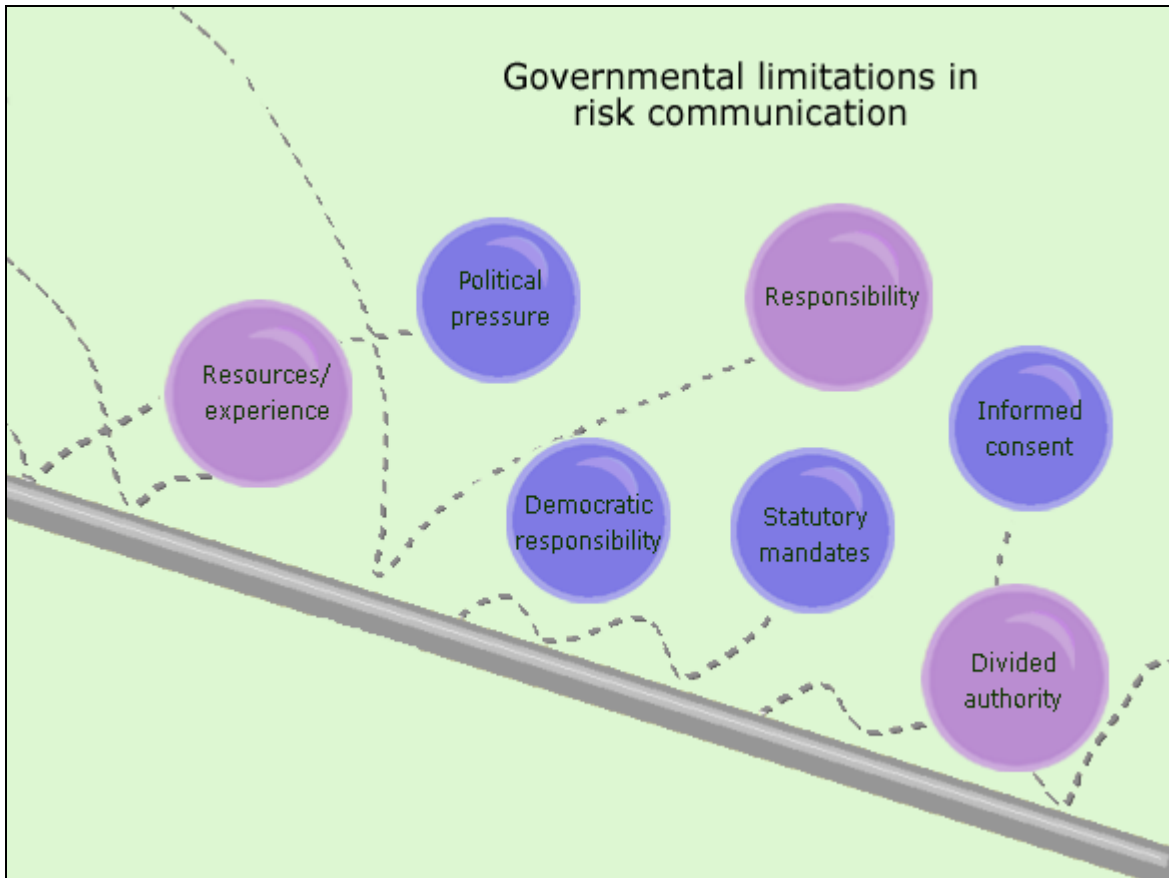


Source: Canadian Food Inspection Agency

The experience demonstrates that the population will distance themselves from the process if they perceive that those responsible for the regulation do not show any interest. Health messages about risks owing to life style face significant challenges because the audience may be apathetic and a heuristic or value bias may arise. It is said, then, that fatalism rationalizes apathy. Sometimes, however, people will find good reasons to take risks only if they perceive social benefits.

Another major challenge in risk communication is the intangibility of the benefit. People are often asked to trust the source of information, whether it be the government or the private sector, when it comes to the benefit of a risk management measure, a benefit that is often intangible.

For that reason, trust building has become a focal point in risk communication. To keep the trust of the population must be a priority in the design of any communication strategy. In this regard, the responsibility and permanent commitment of the Government play a decisive role.



Source: Modified from Canadian Food Inspection Agency

Citizen involvement in decisions about risk management can help build trust on both sides. However, if trust is to be maintained, the public should perceive that their participation is taken seriously enough to have an impact on the development of policies.

Cardinal rules for risk communication

There are no easy recipes for successful risk communication. However, experts who have participated in debates on the topic recommend the following seven rules which, although they may seem obvious, are commonly broken in practice. It is important to identify the reasons for noncompliance with these rules.

1. Accept the public as a legitimate collaborator

A basic principal of risk communication is the right of the community to know and to participate in the decisions that affect their lives, properties and values.

Guidelines: Show your respect for the public and convince them of the sincerity of your effort by involving them before decisions are taken.

Include representatives of all sectors that wish to participate. If you are a government employee, remember that you work for the community. If you are not a government official, the public will still be thankful for your contribution.

The goal of risk communication is to have a group of informed, interested, reasonable, reflective, and cooperating individuals. Anxiety should not be spread, nor should action be replaced.

Point to consider:

The goal of risk communication in a democratic society should be to promote the existence of an informed public that gets involved and takes interest, that is analytical, solution-oriented and cooperative, and with whom one can reason.

2. Plan carefully and evaluate your efforts

Risk communication will be successful only if it is carefully planned.

Guidelines: Start with clear, explicit risk communication objectives; for example, how to provide information to the public, motivate individuals to act, stimulate response to emergencies, or encourage them to help solve problems.

Evaluate the risk information available and determine which parts of it are sound and which parts are weak. Classify and separate your audience into groups. Request the cooperation of professionals who have credibility, knowledge, facility of expression to communicate the desired information clearly, and who are able to interact well with the public. Train your team in communication techniques, praise outstanding accomplishments whenever possible, and test your materials and messages. Evaluate your work carefully and learn from your mistakes.

Points to consider:

- There is no such thing as “the public”; rather, there are many publics, each one with its own interests, concerns, priorities, preferences and organization.
- Different goals in risk communication call for different communication strategies.

3. Listen to the specific concerns of the audience

If you do not listen to the public, you cannot expect the public to listen to you. Communication is a two-way activity.

Guidelines: Do not take it for granted that you know what the public believes, speculates or desires to be done about the risks. Take the time to find out what the people think by conducting interviews. Listen to all the sectors that wish to express their opinion, identify with your listeners, and try to put yourself in their shoes. Recognize the emotions of the public, make them see that you have understood what they are saying and that you make their concerns your own.

Recognize assumptions, symbolic meanings, and underlying economic or political considerations that complicate communication tasks.

Point to consider:

The people in the community are generally more concerned about aspects such as credibility, competence, control, good will, fear, care, and compassion, than about mortality statistics and the quantitative details of risk evaluation.

4. Be honest, frank and open

When communicating risk information, your trump cards are trust and credibility.

Guidelines: Make your credentials known (identify yourself), but do not ask the public to believe you. If you do not know or are unsure of the answer to a question, say so. Admit mistakes. Provide the risk information as soon as you can (emphasize any doubt regarding reliability). You must neither minimize nor exaggerate the level of risk. Speculate with caution. If you have any doubts, say that you will find more information to give them later; always try to give rather than hide information. Discuss the soundness or weakness of data by comparing different sources. Identify worst case scenarios and appropriate ranges of risk.

Point to consider:

Trust and credibility are difficult to achieve; once lost, they are nearly impossible to regain.

5. Coordinate and cooperate with other reliable sources

Having allies can be effective for helping to communicate risks.

Guidelines: Take time to coordinate with other organizations and intra-institutional groups; dedicate time to establishing links with dependencies or organizations that will support you, and seek intermediaries with credibility. Consult with other competent and highly credible individuals regarding the best responses to questions about risks. Engage scientists, physicians or other professionals to help you.

Point to consider:

Conflicts or discrepancies with reliable sources make risk communication difficult.

6. Meet the media's needs

The media are the first to transmit risk information; they play a critical role in fixing agendas in certain situations.

Guidelines: Be open and accessible to reporters. Respect their opinions. Provide them with risk information adapted to the particular needs of each medium (for example, graphs and other visual aids for television). Prepare a

press release and provide background on complex risks. Do not hesitate to follow the stories with admiration or censure. Try to establish lasting relationships of trust with editors and reporters.

Point to consider:

The media are often more interested in politics than in risks, in simplicity than in complexity, in danger than in safety.

7. Speak clearly and deliberately

Technical language and jargon are used in brief messages; however, they can become barriers to successful communication with the public.

Guidelines: Use simple, non-technical language. Be sensitive to local customs, such as the ways of conversing and of dressing. Use concrete, familiar images that make for communication at a personal level. Use examples and anecdotes to make technical risk data come alive. Avoid language that is distant, abstract or unfeeling when referring to deaths, damage, and diseases. As an important part of the risk assessment, demonstrate knowledge and respond (with words and actions) to the emotions expressed by the people — anxiety, fear, anger, tears, helplessness — as well as the different points of view of the public; for example, willingness, possibility of control, familiarity, origin (natural or anthropogenic), benefits, honesty, and potential catastrophic danger.

Use comparisons of different risks to put them into perspective, but avoid comparisons that fail to take into account the distinguishing features of each risk, and those which the people could consider unimportant. Always try to include a discussion about the activities being carried out or that can be carried out. Tell the people what you cannot do. Promise only what you can do and be sure to do what you promise.

Points to consider:

- No matter how well you handle the risk information, some people may not be satisfied.
- Never skimp on efforts to inform the public about the risks. Do not fail to recognize that any disease, damage or death is a tragedy.
- If the people are motivated enough, they will be able to understand information about complex risks, even if individuals are not in agreement with you.

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