

Social amplification of risk revisited - Risk perception and risk governance in the context of systemic risks

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Systemic risks are characterized by high complexity, transboundary effects, stochastic relationships, nonlinear cause–effect patterns with tipping points, and are often associated with less public attention than would be required for effective risk management and follow-through. Risk perceptions, institutional frameworks and cultural settings influence the reaction to and handling of risks. Systemic risks thus require analytical methods that specifically focus on systemic interactions and cascade effects as well as social processes. The presentation addresses the reasons why systemic risks seem to be attenuated in public perception. The presentation touches upon the social amplification of risk framework (SARF), explores how the framework is useful in the context of systemic risks and sketches out needed extensions of that framework. It will be argued that a participatory deliberative approach of inclusive risk governance is a suitable governance strategy for anticipating, mitigating, and managing systemic risks. Governance of systemic risks thus requires the integration of interdisciplinary knowledge and deliberative processes to assess the far-reaching impacts of these risks on different societal domains in a transdisciplinary mode of cooperation between science, policymaking, industry, and society.

The presentation focuses on the systemic risks of the COVID-19 pandemic. The transboundary effects of the pandemic together with its dynamic development pose challenges for the governance of the pandemic. Moreover, not only health risks but also the perceived negative impacts of the pandemic on other sectors of society (e.g., education, economy, and culture) play a role in the risk perception of the pandemic. As risk perceptions influence people’s decision-making processes, e.g., determining their willingness of getting vaccinated, risk communication needs to be transparent about risk-risk trade-offs.