Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Resolution 986 (1992)[1]

Technological risks and society

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The Assembly is aware that technological innovation is an ineluctable feature of modern society. It will continue, for a long time to come, to act as the driving force in commercial and industrial competition. While the public draws substantial benefits from technological progress, it has also developed a keener awareness of the supposed effects of certain technologies on the ethical values on which our society is based, on health and on the environment.

2. In this context, the issue of risks -particularly those present in certain new technologies -becomes more complex : despite a general improvement in safety levels and a substantial reduction in traditional risks, new types of risks, far more difficult to calculate and predict, are emerging ; these are often major risks capable of affecting a huge area of the planet, inflicting belatedly discovered long-term effects.

3. In recent years, the complexity of the risks debate has also become apparent : there is no ‘‘objective method" offering a simple basis for calculation. In particular, the probabilistic formula (risk = extent of damage x probability) remains the best way of assessment even if its value is debatable in cases of very extensive damage and virtually zero probability.

4. Sociological studies have also shown that the general public's perception of risks is based on criteria which frequently differ from those applied by scientists and engineers. Although this perception is not irrational, it is often typified by superficial knowledge and occasionally by the damaging influence of the media.

5. The social and political assessment of risks is basically a balancing of certain benefits of an activity against the risks it entails. Assessment must rely on scientific appraisal but it depends above all on value choices and the models we adopt for our life and society. It is therefore a classic democratic process, requiring close communication between the protagonists and an interdisciplinary approach.

6. The Sub-Committee on Technology Policy of the Committee on Science and Technology organised a colloquy (Locarno, 25-26 May 1992) to examine these concerns and discuss the numerous aspects which the technological risks issue now encompasses, paying especial attention to the function and responsibility of policy-makers.

7. The colloquy showed that experts and the general public act and react in different ways, and that politicians and above all scientists and industrialists had lost much of their credibility with regard to industrial risks.

8. The Assembly believes that it is essential to renew the dialogue between all the protagonists, clearly defining the role to be played by each group, and makes the following suggestions :

8.1. industrialists should provide full, accurate and up-to-date information and set up, together with the public authorities, emergency plans whenever major technical risks are involved ;

8.2. the public should demand this information, ask questions and make its views known to decision-makers ;

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1. Assembly debate on 1 October 1992 (12th Sitting) (seeDoc. 6663, report of the Committee on Science and Technology, Rapporteur : Mr Birraux). Text adopted by the Assembly on 1 October 1992 (12th Sitting).

8.3. members of government and elected representatives at different levels should take decisions, once they have gathered a maximum of information on the possible consequences ;

8.4. scientists should assist members of parliament in the evaluation of their choices ;

8.5. the media should present the industrial risks issue in full and accurate detail.

9. The parliaments of several Council of Europe member states have already set up structures for assessing scientific and technical choices. The Assembly consequently invites member states' parliaments and governments to review their procedures for decision-making on scientific and technical matters in the light of this report and make any necessary changes, notably with a view to taking society's perceptions into greater consideration.

10. Since most of the situations requiring assessment are present in both eastern and western Europe, it is necessary to establish co-operation between the parliaments of these countries and provide a common pool of experience.