

SUMMARY

EFFECTIVE RISK
COMMUNICATION:

AN INVENTORY STUDY
IN THE NETHERLANDS

WODC projectnummer 3032



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Summary

This study investigated the effectiveness and future orientation of the way in which the Dutch government communicates risks to the general public. Research questions focused on the extent that the communication aims were reached and fulfilled the information needs of the general public. It was further investigated to what extent the communication aims corresponded to relevant governmental policy documents and to what extent the development and execution of risk communication processes were adequate and efficient, and complied with the scientific knowledge on risk communication.

The study had a mixed-methods design and consisted of a literature review, three empirical investigations among citizens (a survey, a secondary analysis of panel studies related to the corona crisis, and a content analyses of the reactions on social media to press conferences announcing behavioural guidelines) and a set of in-depth interviews with national and regional governmental risk communication professionals.

Results showed that a large proportion of the public considers itself well-informed regarding risks in the local environment, but less well-informed with respect to adequate actions that they can take themselves to reduce these risks. Participants indicated to have recently taken a number of actions that were easy to implement to reduce risks, such as those posed by the corona virus. Citizens seem to have a need for information that is personally relevant. The information provided by the government regarding the risks mentioned in the “Regionaal Risicoprofiel” was considered to be clear and well-articulated. Citizens further indicated that, in the spring of 2020, the government explained their motivations behind the corona related advices, rules and regulations well.

The interviews with the professionals made clear that the addressed risk communication topics conformed to regional and national policy documents (the “Regionale Risicoprofielen” and the “Nationale Veiligheid Strategie”). The addressed risks were however not restricted to the topics mentioned in those policy documents. The risk communication professionals collaborated with many other relevant communicators. The way their risk communication is designed, partly corresponds to scientific advice to enhance effectiveness. The risk communication activities mentioned by the professionals do correspond, however, with the criteria for a future orientated risk communication practice as laid down in the “Plan van aanpak toekomstbestendige risico- en crisiscommunicatie”.

A note of caution relates to the generalisation of the findings. Governmental risk communication entails that 1) a governmental organisation 2) communicates a message 3) to a particular audience 4) by means of a (combination of) media 5) to reach a particular aim 6) among a particular target group. This means that there is a large diversity in the design and implementation of risk communication in the Netherlands. In view of this diversity, it is difficult to generalise the empirical findings on the effectiveness and future orientation of the way in which the Dutch government communicates risks to the general public.