



Risk-based policy-making and scientific uncertainty dominate discussion at 24th annual meeting of SRA Europe

For the European science community 1992 marks an important year. It was then that the Maastricht treaty was signed, thereby establishing policy-making harmony, as we currently understand it, across the European Union.

The formation of the EU has allowed scientists in European countries to collaborate on political and economic decision-making.

The Maastricht Treaty is notable because it created the current structure of the European Union;-with pillars for Justice and Home Affairs, Common Foreign and Security Policy and the European Community. It established the EU as it exists today; including how the EU manages substantive policy areas dealing with risk.

What better place, therefore, to host the 24th annual meeting of the European chapter of the Society of Risk Analysis on bridging the gap between science and policy-making than at the University of Maastricht.

The whole event kicked off Sunday evening on the banks of the Maas, with drinks at the Ipanema café located in Bonnefantenmuseum Maastricht; but the real fun began

the next morning with the first plenary session. As statisticians, risk analysts and general academics know, the potential for disaster is ever-present; the probability of risk can never be 0%. This was exemplified in a series of events, which caused a couple of relatively minor changes to the itinerary. Local organizer Frederic Boudier handled all this with style and grace, dedicating the meeting to risk icon Ulrich Beck.

Victim of airline misdirection, Prof. Ellen Peters proved her dedication to the SRA by delivering her insight on risk perception via Skype, at the entirely appropriate time- for us in Maastricht at least- of 3am Ohio time. Prof. Peters delivered provocative data on numerosity and the inflation or trivialization of risk based on numerical cognition.

In true French fashion, Prof. Claude Fischler then followed up with his research on food and the risks consumers choose to take in what we buy and eat. From the shunning of rigorous health standards associated with the sale of the potentially deadly puffer fish in Fugu, Japan, to the aversion of beef eating by scientists as a result of latent social amplification of the threat of BSE, Prof. Fischler set out in compelling terms how risk affects consumable goods.

Shining star, President-elect Michael Siegrist, validated his election by coming to the rescue with a spare presentation he happened to have lying around on the discrepancy lay people have on acceptance of natural versus identical man-made disasters.

While Prof. Fischler provoked an amplified enthusiastic response from attendees, the peppy group of experts greeted pie and coffee that morning with exceptional gusto.

Parallel sessions flew by as attendees hopped between presentations on safety culture, risk perception, climate change and risk governance, and soon it was time for the star-studded roundtable on the legal side of EU policy-making. Chaired by

Prof. Ellen Vos, Dirk Detken of EFSA and Aleksander Rusanov of the European Medicines Agency (EMA) discussed the decision-making side of risk assessment, accompanied by Dr. Frederic Boudier from Maastricht University who made the argument for scientists being closely involved in the policy process. This debate gave the audience an opportunity to gain some insight on the top-down side of policy-making, as well as answers to burning questions in this field.

Monday concluded with drinks over poster presentations and soon the delegates dispersed to rest and mull over the fascinating information taken in on day one.

Bright eyes and eager minds met Ragnar Lofstedt the next morning for the second plenary of the meeting. Bathed in morning sunlight, Dutch MP Sharon Gesthuizen kicked off the discussion on risk policy and transparency. President of the European Environment Bureau Dr. Mikael Karlsson then presented his views on the impact poor environmental policy-making decisions are having on the EU's economy. Julie Girling, Member of the European Parliament, discussed her process and understanding in making science-based policy decisions tackling the issues of uncertainty and numerosity.

Controversies and climate change dominated the topics that morning, and luckily for Prof. Bruine de Bruin the recent European heat wave gave her an opportunity to continue research on positive reactions to heat warnings among UK citizens.

Discussions were flowing as the delegates congregated in Maastricht town hall for the reception event. A wonderful welcome and free reign to explore the building set the evening off to a perfect start. Soon we were off to Michelin-starred Château Neercanne for dinner. Surrounded by baroque gardens, this breathtaking venue is located in the picturesque Dutch countryside along the Belgian boarder. Salmon tartar and steaks were served, followed by cheese and desserts in the ancient Roman caves beneath the Castle.

Slightly less fresh but still eager minds met our final plenary of the conference. Prof. Erik Lebret lightened the mood with an endearing cartoon on the difference in risk perception based on personal involvement, and coined the phrase of the conference “do you push the big guy off the bridge?” Dutch Senator, Prof. Sybe Schaap wrapped up by explaining his process in environmental and social decision-making in the Netherlands.

Awards were announced and on behalf of the whole SRA we would like to congratulate Student Scholarship winners Martina Gamp (Germany) and Astrid Kause (Germany), Hanna Landquist (Sweden) as the first recipients of the Ortwin Renn Student Prize for Applied Risk Research and Handan Kaplan as poster winner of the 2015 SRA European meeting.

Crowds began to disperse as parallel sessions came to a close and the general assembly meeting wrapped up any outstanding issues and the torch was officially handed from President Lars Bodsberg to President-elect Michael Siegrist.

In all, the meeting was a highly effective platform for knowledge sharing, networking and detailed discussions. These included debates regarding the transparency of government officials as well as the need to develop effective communication strategies between scientists and decision-makers.

A big thank you to the organization team and volunteers for all their efforts in pulling off this exceptional meeting.

Organization team: Frederic Boudier, Marijke Hermans, Wiebe Bijker, Ric van Poll, Nicolas Rossignol, Arjen van der Heide, Jacqueline Graff, Dianne Borgignons, Ilona Vermeeren.

Volunteers: Jimmy Los, Libor Lochman, Marcel Hoss, Amira Al Makzomy Tahir, Peyam Sadiq, Sarah Wagner and Adam Hussain.

Check out the full photo album here.

https://www.flickr.com/photos/society_for_risk_analysis/sets/72157655074469415

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