



EuroScientist Interview: Ortwin Renn: Managing people's risk perception to build trust

By Sabine Louët

Published on EuroScientist: www.euroscientist.com

Building trust requires communicating the value and limitations of risk assessment

"Trust is a very precious good. . . Trust takes a long time to gain trust and takes very little time to lose it." That's according to Ortwin Renn, a professor for [environmental sociology and technology assessment](#) at the University of Stuttgart, in Germany. "For that reason, I think, it is very important to invest in activities that have the potential to build trust." One of the major prerequisites is honesty about what science can do and what it cannot do. He adds: "We cannot dissolve uncertainty. We have to be sure we don't give the impression that we can predict everything," but he still believes we can give directions and orientations of how to characterise and handle uncertainty.

Building people's trust through science hinges on providing them with an understanding of the constrained power of risk analysis. And Renn knows a lot about risk. He is the dean of the Economic and Social Sciences Department, and director of the [Stuttgart Research Center for Interdisciplinary Risk and Innovation Studies](#). He also heads the non-profit company [DIALOGIK](#), a research institute for the investigation of communication and participation processes in environmental policy making.

In the past, he served on the panel on 'Public Participation in Environmental Assessment and Decision Making' of the US National Academy of Sciences in Washington, DC from 2005 to 2007, on the German Federal Government's 'Commission on Energy Ethics after Fukushima' in 2011 and from 2012 to 2014 on the Scientific Advisory Board of EU President Barroso.

Read this post online: <http://www.euroscientist.com/euroscientist-interview-ortwin-renn-managing-peoples-risk-perception-to-build-trust>

In this interview with *EuroScientist*, Ortwin Renn discusses facts and facets of risk predictions.

He reveals how, in the case of the Ebola outbreak, for example, accurate risk assessment can help to avoid panic and have the right precautions in place. He says: “If you have much better understanding of the risks, their causes and their consequences, this helps us to inform policy-making and, in the end, save human lives.”

But he cautions that although risk assessments have been instrumental in saving people’s lives, that there are always exceptions to the rule and the future will always have uncertainty. A cautious approach is therefore required because “There are always exceptions, which is very difficult in risk communication.” Hence people’s trust can be affected by their understanding of the assessment of risks provided. “What we need to tell people that science cannot overcome this ambiguity with what will happen in the future.”

However, he believes, “Science can help us to have less errors that we can avoid absurd or highly unlikely events, but it cannot prevent errors from happening.” He then concludes: “It’s important that we don’t oversell the potential of science in shaping the future.”

Video and cover text by Arran Frood

Photo credit: [Acatech](#)



Euroscientist uploaded a video 42 minutes ago



EuroScientist Interview Ortwin Renn

by Euroscientist
42 minutes ago • 6 views