

Background

Starting with 2000, the expert group "Society and Policy Support" carries out research on various aspects of risk governance. Measuring several risk perception items at regular intervals with the Belgian population is an important part of this research. SCK•CEN has organised a first risk perception barometer in 2002 and a second one in 2006. The 2006 barometer is based on 1063 Computer Assisted Personal Interviews, with a duration of ~35 min. The large scale of the survey ensures that general trends can be detected and allows specific and detailed analysis on subgroups of the population. Besides the classical background variables used to obtain a sample representative for the Belgian 18+ population (age, language, habitat, gender and social class), several questions were included assessing the sociological context and the psychological personality profile.

Objectives

A series of questions on risk perception, confidence in authorities and specific nuclear topics were repeated in 2006 and constitute a fixed core, allowing comparison over time in Belgium, as well as with the results from the IRSN French barometer. In addition, a number of topics such as acceptance of legal norms and management options for radioactively contaminated milk, energy, nuclear waste and the perception of the Chernobyl accident were covered in detail in the 2006 edition of the SCK•CEN barometer.

Principal results

The absolute figures of the risk perception drastically dropped (30 to 40% lower) for domains such as terrorism, chemical or nuclear waste or accidents in installations and terrorism compared to 2002, while for domains such as drugs, traffic accidents, environment pollution or traffic accidents they remain high. An overall rise in the confidence in authorities is observed, especially for domains where the Belgian authorities were often in the media with new actions or programmes. Comparing the 'nuclear' risk/trust items with the 'chemical' analogues, we observe in 2006 a marginally lower risk perception and a higher trust in authorities for the nuclear, and this for all domains (risk perception for accidents, waste or terrorist attacks).

Opinions on nuclear energy are further enquired in a more general series of questions on people's attitude and expectations on energy. The 66% majority supporting the 'reduction of nuclear power stations in Europe' in 2002 diminished to 51%, while disagreement rose from 12% to 24%. The statement that "NPPs irrevocably endanger the future of our children" was agreed by 37% (in 2002 47%), while opposed by 36% (in 2002 24%), both results illustrating a wider acceptance of nuclear power for energy production. Support for nuclear research rose from 46% in 2002 to 75% of the population in 2006.

The analysis of the perception of the Chernobyl accident shows that 90% of the respondents believe that there are still problems with the radioactive contamination in the former SU and 40% think that the number of cancers in Belgium increased due to this accident. About 45% thinks an accident as serious can happen in Belgium, but 77% agrees that the Belgian installations are technically superior to those in the former SU.

On the radioactive waste disposal, the opinions are somewhat ambiguous, for instance: 60% would prefer a deep underground disposal both for low and high level waste, although 60% agrees that retrievability is important; or nearly 55% agrees that "Belgium is too densely populated to build a nuclear waste disposal site" and a similar majority thinks that "it is unacceptable that Belgian waste is exported for disposal abroad". For the long-term safety of a surface repository for low level radioactive waste, 26% agrees that it is possible to guarantee safety provided sufficient control, while 34 % disagrees.

Concerning management options for radioactively contaminated milk, the analysis of public acceptance and consumer's behaviour shows that people favour a precautionary policy, aiming at preventing any contamination in the food chain. This upholds options like clean feeding and food ban with destruction of all contaminated foodstuff. Feed additives can be a complementary option in case of a larger scale or longer time contamination, but presumably this would lead to a significant decline in the consumption of local products. Milk processing would have to count on a very limited market segment, whereas dilution of milk is strongly opposed in any circumstance.

Future developments

A new edition of the SCK•CEN barometer is planned for 2008. Along with the fixed part, a number of new issues supporting the ongoing research in the SPS group, such as sustainable development or risk communication, could be addressed in detail.

Main contact person

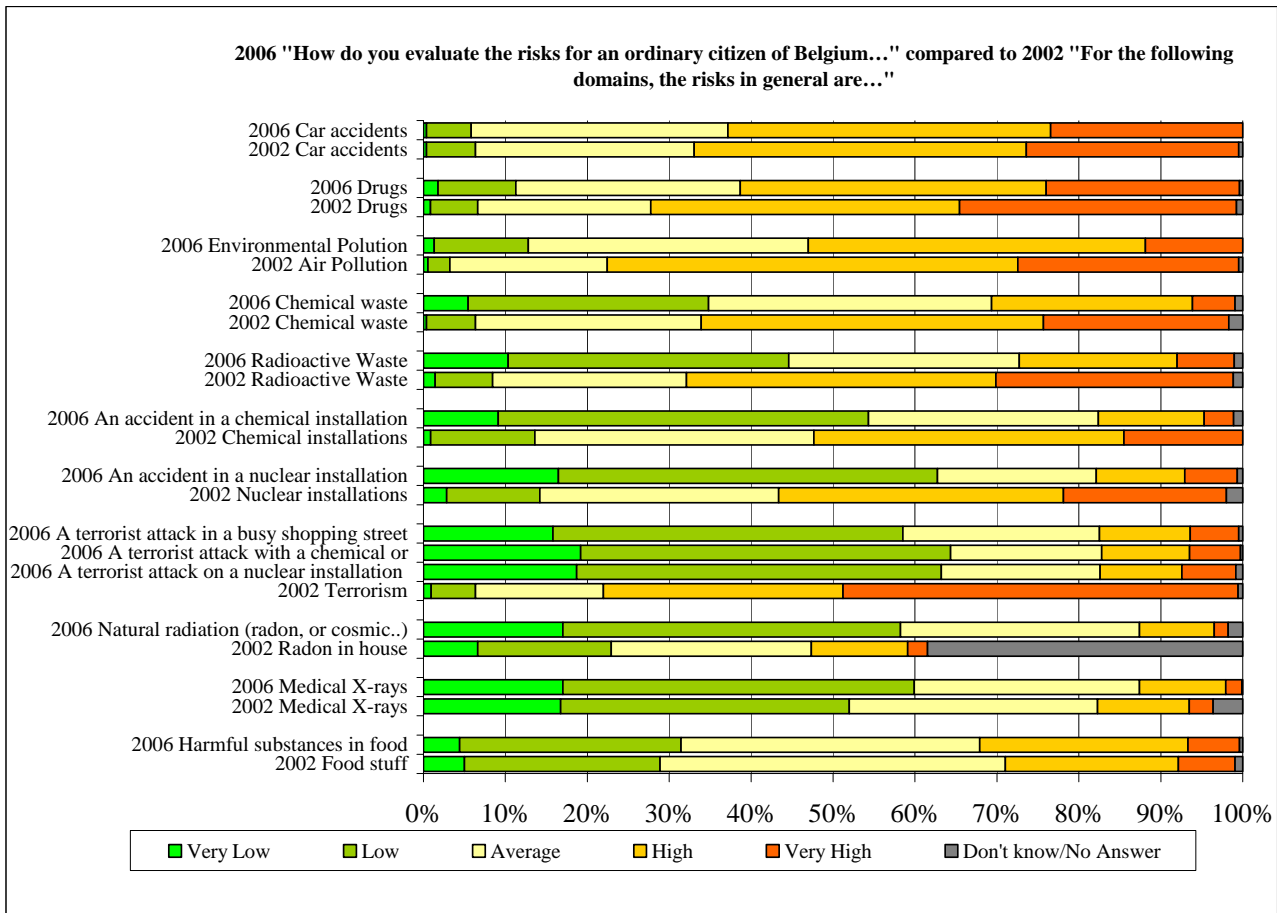
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Main references

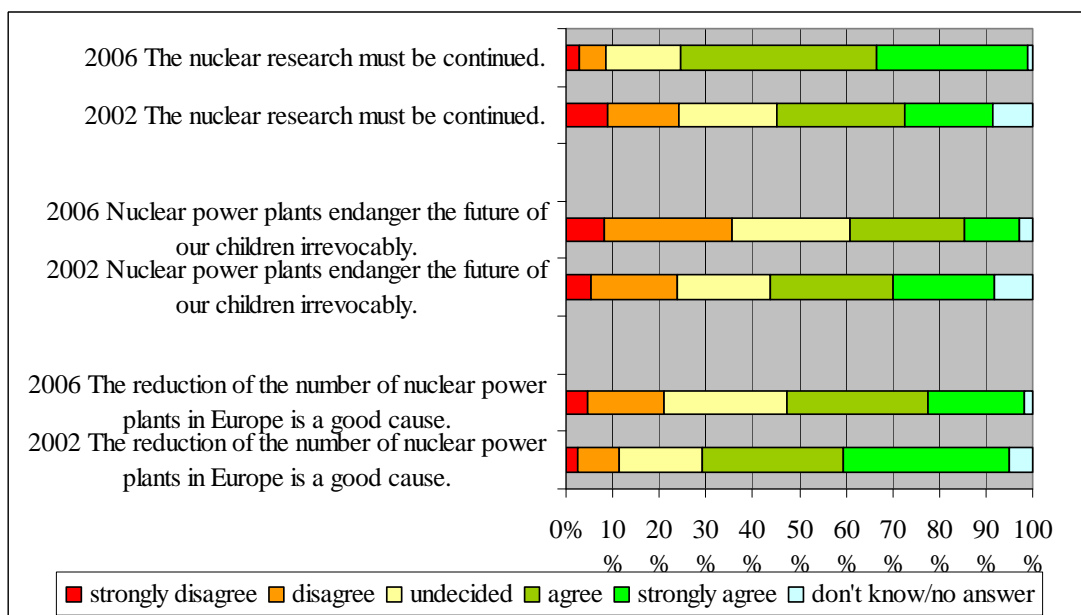
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Risk perception for a number of items in 2002 and 2006



Evolution of the public acceptance of nuclear research / energy