

Conclusions from the DMF-Workshop on Risk Communication, Munich, 18-19-October 2006

1. What has been achieved by the projects? What are the lessons learned

- The surveys carried out within DMF provide a good and substantiated database on risk perception of the topic “mobile telecommunication” within the general public and certain subgroups. There are several additional questions, that could possibly be answered by subsequent analyses of the data.
- The statistical data analysis of the annual surveys clearly shows that the magnitude of public concern and the feeling of impairment in the general public is rather invariable over the years. The data also show a strong stability in the comparative risk perception. Though data interpretation should not disregard a potential influence of a possible self-selection bias: If unconcerned people tend to reject survey participation, while concerned people do participate, this could result in an underestimation of the fraction of unconcerned people.
- In relation to the general public the comparison between different possible health risks shows that several other risks (e.g. air pollution, UV-radiation or genetically modified food) are ranked higher than EMF. Nevertheless in certain subgroups the concern regarding EMF and the perceived impairment due to EMF is high.
- The results display central aspects of improving information and communication measures for specific target groups. For example, population groups that show a higher concern require specific recommendations on how to reduce exposure to EMF – irrespective of a causal relationship between exposure and health effect.
- Regarding the site acquisition process the self commitment as well as agreements at the federal states’ level were seen as an appropriate means to contribute to a optimization of the conflict situation in the municipalities. However, to reach the goal of evaluating the implementation of the self commitment a more critical view in the annual reports was suggested.

2. Where do we still have gaps?

- The descriptive results of the annual survey show the general opinion of the population towards mobile communications and EMF over time and give some insight into sociodemographic variables. In addition more information about the reasons for being concerned or unconcerned are required.
- Further investigation is required how far the stability of the survey data might be indicative of a scarce effectiveness of communication strategies.
- More emphasis should be placed on comparative investigation on risk perception and communication in international collaboration.

- Trust, credibility and acceptance are very relevant in personal communication situations. Whether they are also relevant for risk communication, which often takes place in a non personal setting, remains to be shown. Furthermore concrete possibilities to actively increase trust or acceptance should be identified.
- A necessary prerequisite for credibility is a comprehensive discussion within an institution, ensuring an exchange between the various sections and colleagues working with this topic according to possibly established mission statements of institutions.
- More detailed information is needed on the criteria for laypeople-oriented, comprehensible and credible information. Which concrete topics and contents should be considered for those subgroups of the population requiring more information on EMF (e.g. biological aspect, exposure, etc.)?
- It is time to consolidate the various findings of the single studies on risk perception, risk communication and specific target groups . A meta-analysis of the data and results was considered a necessary measure to contribute to a comprehensive evaluation. The next step now has to be applying the results into practice in form of concrete measures.
- Concomitant evaluation both of already existing and new measures and materials could reveal their role in risk communication and could thus contribute to its improvement. Empirical evaluation studies require clear criteria for measuring improvement and also a clear definition of the objective(s) of risk communication.
- In risk communication settings differences between experts and laypersons in definition and usage of the term “risk” should be taken into account to a greater extent. This concerns specially an intensified explanation of expert terminology that might presumably be unknown to lay people (application of the terms “risk”, “hazard”, relative risk”, etc.).
- More research is required to handle the problem often faced in practice how to communicate about scientific uncertainty and about the societal handling of scientific uncertainties.
- Recommendations for adequate dealing with multipliers such as medical professionals in communication have to be given. What kind of impact do trainings have, and how could they be improved?
- Further information is required on the questions: How to deal with different belief groups in communication? How are different belief groups or target groups influenced by information? What are the mechanisms, what is their impact? How to deal with emotions in communication?

3. What practical impact do the findings have in the field of information and risk communication

- The specific and differently motivated information requirements have to be met in a more differentiated fashion. This applies to the content as well as to form and medium of the measures. In this sense decisions have to be made about the important target groups, considering needs and interest of groups, as well as their knowledge and their motivation to process information.

- The evaluation of risk communication measures has to be an inherent part of their application.
- Municipalities face the need to practise risk communication at the local level and to solve local conflicts emerging during the site acquisition process. Particularly for smaller and rural municipalities respective assistance in form of concrete and feasible recommendations has to be provided. It should be made clear that it is not the municipalities task to deal with the risk/health issue. Importance was attached to EMF exposure measurement as a possibility for municipalities to actually provide information to their citizens about a relevant risk parameter.
- It was recommended to make more intensive use of the media for information about EMF in order to place the EMF-topic as an “everyday” topic in Media (journals, newspapers).

4. Are there lessons learned that could be transferred to similar situations in the future?

- The necessary identification of (specific) information needs in the public, as well as the usage of appropriate information and communication strategies and measures is transferable to several other similar situations. Thereby it should be paid attention to the actual similarity of situations.
- The majority of the specific project results gained within the DMF are EMF-specific. General aspects as for example factors influencing risk perception in general and requirements regarding communication between experts and laypersons can be transferred to other situations than EMF.
- The fact that different levels of affectedness related to the perception of risks exist in the population can be transferred, whereas for each risk situation a specific group composition is faced.