

Integrating environmental risk into China's risk management discourse

Lei ZHANG and Lijin ZHONG

Human society is encountering a new and proliferating set of public health risks in the new millennium, ranging from natural disasters and industrial accidents, to infectious diseases. This is particularly true in China, which is in the midst of rapid social, economic and political transitions. Although various (man-caused) risks have accompanied and been intensified by China's modernization since the end of 1970s, it is remarkable that a risk management system did not exist in China until recently, when society was shocked by a series of disasters and accidents including SARS, avian flu and the chemical spill in the Songhuajiang River in 2005. It was the last incident in particular that finally kicked off the development of a national risk management system in China. This paper analyses the *status quo* of the legislation, institutions and mechanisms of risk management in China and identifies opportunities/strategies for integrating environmental elements into the emerging system. The study concludes that alarming accidents have succeeded in putting risk management on the top of the public and political agenda but current risk management efforts in China can be characterized as reactive, compartmentalized, and lacking integration between policy efforts and resources. There is also a danger that the traditional governmental approach may fail to create an effective risk management system, which requires improved transparency, accountabilities, cross-sectoral coordination, institutionalized public participation, effective enforcement of environmental impact assessment, and clear definition of responsibilities.