

# Study of Mass Incidents of Major Projects Based on Social Expectations

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## Abstract

In recent years, major projects are increasingly becoming the source of social stability risk in China that induces mass incidents. Risk society changes evaluation criteria on major projects, and also changes the agenda setting of project decision-making. Social stability risk caused by major projects comes from interest groups' social expectations of the project in terms of interests, safety and legality, and such social expectations directly lead to behaviors or behavioral tendencies related to social stability. Including analysis of social expectations into the social stability risk assessment framework helps objectively and comprehensively reflect the social effects arising from the project implementation, thus to prevent various types of social conflict events in a more reasonable and effective manner.

**Keywords:** Risk Society; Major Projects; Social Expectations; Social stability Risk Assessment

## 1. Introduction

Due to lack of thinking or underestimates of the vital interests of the broad masses, major projects often become the fuse of group events in China. Major projects' social stability risk is a branch of social stability risk, specifically referring to social unrest, disorder, and other phenomena induced by major project-related elements. Social stability risk assessment on major projects is an important part of projects' social impact assessment system and an important institutional measure to guard against social risks.

Due to an upward trend of social group events arising from the launch of major projects, the academia is putting increasing emphasis on exploration of projects' social risks and other related areas. However, because of a late start, the academic achievements in terms of conceptual framework, quantitative analysis or empirical interpretation can be described as

hard-pressed. For now, the main impact of these attempts is still limited to the implantation of the concept of maintaining stability into major projects, while their scientificness, systematicness, effectiveness and feasibility of actual operation and so on needs to be improved.

## 2. Major Projects from the Perspective of Risk Society

The notion of risk society was first proposed by German professor of sociology Ulrich Beck in 1986. Some well-known contemporary Western social theorists such as Anthony Giddens, Sott Lash, Niklas Luhmann and so on made pioneering researches in this regard to form the contemporary theory of risk society. In their view, modernity is no longer an undisputed process, but produces many dangers or defects. "Postmodern core system-government, industry, and science is the main manufacturer of risk." [2] From the theoretical significance, risk society

theory means both a shift of research paradigm of risk issue and a breakthrough from traditional sociological perspective. Discussions on risk issue in the past were mostly confined to the field of natural science and engineering technology, while risk society theory "makes risk an important issue in social theory" [3] Therefore, it is necessary to re-examine major projects from the perspective of risk society.

### **2.1 On type of risk, construction risk gradually replaces material risk**

Academic definition of risk is divided into two categories: one sees risk as a material property; the other sees risk as a social construction. This path to understanding is covered in the area of technical economics with obvious overtone of "economic doctrine" and tendency to "rational supremacy". With the increasingly complex social development, this path to understanding cannot give people a more macro, more comprehensive framework. By contrast, the emphasis on social construction of risk is more in line with personal experience of risks arising from major projects. Risk is not material existence, but is defined and constructed by society. "They are usually invisible, relying on causal interpretation, and in the field of knowledge can be changed, enlarged, intensified or minimized." [4] Social stability risk caused by major projects is no longer purely "objective" existence, but affects the subjective aspects of risk proliferation, such as voluntary acceptance, the ability of risk aversion, level of risk awareness and so on, and shapes the subjective reaction of the public to objective risk events, thus a new type of subjective risk is constructed.

### **2.2 On decision-making settings, external pressure mode gradually challenges closed mode**

The current mass incidents caused by major projects in China are mostly due to exclusion or lack of participation in project establishment, compensation on loss of land, demolition and resettlement. As Baker said, "the traditional

decision-making mechanism, due to lack of two-way, interactive communication between technology and society, while overlooking value judgments in the plural social field and reflection on social rationality, often casts a suspicion of black-box operation over the technological risk regulation and control." [7] But this agenda setting mode is gradually subject to more and more challenges and the decision-making agenda setting mode for major projects is gradually transforming to external pressure mode. "In this mode, non-governmental organizations propose issues, which then fully extend to first become public agenda, and ultimately enter the institutional agenda." [8] The planning decision-making for major projects is increasingly subject to the challenge of the opening of jurisdiction and decision-making structure, while the closed-door consultations between experts and decision-makers are reaching or transforming to an open dialogue between various agents.

### **2.3 On evaluation criteria, risk - income mode gradually replaces cost - income mode**

Traditional social risk studies focus on the "material" part, mainly discussing the lack of technology, policy, institution and other material systems. High-risk society has changed the evaluation criteria of major projects." If the project evaluation criteria in the past were based on 'income - cost' ratio, then the present and future criteria will be based on 'income - risk' ratio. [9] An overall consequence of the rising risk culture is that "risk discourse is gradually overshadowing economic discourse to become the main feature of contemporary society". [10] As Baker said, "From a historical perspective of social evolution, sooner or later in the continuous process of modernization, 'wealth - distribution' society's social problems and conflicts will start to combine the corresponding factors of 'risk - distribution' society. [11] Enhanced risk perception makes risk acceptance no longer a matter of course, so that any project

becomes a product of agreement of different perceptions on risk. When interests coexist with crisis, the degree of social acceptance on a project determines the success or failure of the project construction.

### **3. Social Expectations-based Social Risk Assessment System**

Risk society theory believes that "the core of risk awareness does not lie in the present, but in the future. In risk society, the past loses its power to determine the present and its position is replaced by the future. Therefore, non-existent, imaged or virtual things become the reason for present experience and action." [12] This shows that the actual meaning of modern risk lies in expectations of the future. As risk becomes a vocabulary in future tense, its analysis by introduction of the concept of expectations becomes an issue of meaning.

Risk is related to expectations and comes from "expected variables" in potential things. The significance and importance of these variables is proportional to the unpredictable nature and threats of risk. As for social stability risk assessment of major projects, people is no longer a static, materialized, and one-way affected target, but become a subject making relevant reaction to the type and extent of the expected impact. Social stability risk caused by major projects comes from social expectations of interest groups of the project in terms of interests, safety and legality and such social expectations directly lead to behaviors or behavioral tendencies related to social stability.

#### **3.1 Interests-based social expectations**

An important cause of mass incidents on major projects is to safeguard the interests. The interests-based social expectations include two parts: one is evaluation and compensation of the loss caused or that may result from a major project and such social expectations are met mainly through monetary compensation,

including tax relief, direct payment of money, health insurance, etc.; the other is transfer in part of a major project's income to the overall regional economic and social development, through the provision of public facilities, healthcare services, real estate price guarantee, employment, and improvement of residential environment and other measures to eliminate people's sense of relative deprivation. The high degree of uncertainty and the enormous dangers of modern risk makes the majority of the public demand for public goods in a more broad and more urgent manner than ever, "which makes strong requirements in terms of both quality and quantity for basic needs such as narrowing the income gap, realizing social redistribution, etc., and health care, education, pension, environmental protection and other aspects of needs." [14] How to scientifically and effectively improve interest compensation mechanism and guide interests-based social expectations in a rational manner become an important part of social stability risk assessment.

#### **3.2 Safety-based social expectations**

"Expectations on safety" fall in the domain of psychology, referring to individual feelings and awareness of safety on a variety of objective risks existing in the outside world. Social stability risk around large chemical plants, nuclear power plants and other major projects is in large due to public expectations of safety anxiety. For the general public, they have their own mode, assumptions and subjective estimation strategy of risk expectations. Although there are some signs of social expectations on safety, because the time, manifestation and scale are often unforeseen, the social stability risk renders unexpected and urgent nature. After the eruption of nuclear leak accident in Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant and the earlier leak accident in Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, the coefficient of people's expectations on their safety enhanced nonlinearly, and this makes a typical example.

Therefore, construction of an evaluation model of social expectations on safety and a comprehensive analysis of the manifestations, characteristics, causes, impacts, etc. of the relevant interest groups' anxieties is an important part of social stability risk assessment of special major projects.

### **3.3 Legitimacy-based social expectations**

Legitimacy includes two aspects. One is in de jure sense, i.e. whether the major project planning is in conflict with existing policies, laws, and regulations, whether the project goes through legal approval procedures, whether the conditions in terms of time, manpower, material and financial resources, etc. are in place, whether the project implementation program is concrete and detailed, whether the supporting measures are perfect, etc. Such social expectations mainly refer to satisfaction of participation, i.e. in the siting, construction and operating phases of major projects, providing the public with opinion polls, hearing, open information on operation and management, reasonable feedback of interest demands and other participatory approaches. The other is in social significance. Such social expectations mainly refer to satisfaction of trust, forming a solid system of trust between the people, the operating parties, experts, government and other stakeholders. "A system needs trust as the input condition, while lack of trust will form a vicious cycle, so that the system is unable to stimulate supportive actions in the environment of uncertainties and risks." [15] Major projects' own legitimacy, especially whether they are trusted by stakeholders, is an essential part of social stability risk assessment.

### **3.4 Three-dimensional social risk assessment system**

Through analysis of social expectations and social stability risk mechanism of action, we can try to establish a new social stability risk assessment mechanism for major projects. In this

system, the social stability risk assessment, outside the economics-based framework of social "benefits - cost" analysis, objectively and comprehensively reflects the social effects of project implementation. The public is no longer a static, one-dimensional object, but becomes a dynamic subject on par with major projects; dominant indicators of social stability risk correspond to a set of virtual indicators of public social expectations. Unlike social development indicators with emphasis on the macro- and meso-impact of major projects, social expectations indicators are committed to measurement of social stability risk from a more micro level, focusing on the research of the extent of risk expected by the people. Different with the single-threaded impact flow of the existing evaluation system, this mechanism believes that there is a dual-threaded risk process between two subjects of "major projects" and "the public", where as the major projects pose risk on the public, the public social expectations, in turn, impose impact on major projects. In risk society, social expectations provide a path of thinking for the research of social stability risk assessment on major projects and improve the existing evaluation system with long-term focus on projects as the subject.

## **4. Conclusions**

Social stability is essentially a balanced state of order. When the gap between people's social expectations and the actual situation is small, people's affinity with the community is often relatively high, which is conducive to social stability; in contrast, if the gap is large, people are often prone to discontent, which is not conducive to social stability. Social expectations analysis as an important tool can be included into the social stability risk assessment framework, so that in the assessment process the public opinions and suggestions are fully taken in and respected, so as to pay attention to and reflect the aspirations of the masses of the

various aspects and identify the common interests of the majorities and specific interests groups. Therefore, the construction of a measurement and assessment system of social expectations on major projects and a comprehensive analysis of the manifestations, characteristics, causes, impacts and other aspects of risk expectations of relevant interest groups is the main basis of decision-making, design and implementation of major projects and plays a positive role in prevention and reduction of social security risks.

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