I have mentioned the precautionary principle in past posts and thought it time to take a closer look at what this really means. The European Union does not have an official definition even though they use the principle. Instead the EU has a working definition suggested by R ene von Schomberg et al
:

“Where, following an assessment of available scientific information, there are reasonable grounds for concern for the possibility of adverse effects but scientific uncertainty persists, provisional risk management measures based on a broad cost/benefit analysis whereby priority will be given to human health and the environment, necessary to ensure the chosen high level of protection in the Community and proportionate to this level of protection, may be adopted, pending further scientific information for a more comprehensive risk assessment, without having to wait until the reality and seriousness of those adverse effects become fully apparent”.

So what does this really mean?

According to a Communication from Commission of the European Communities , its scope is wide and deep, covering many issues.

The Precautionary Principle goes beyond how you and I may be affected in the here and now, beyond even how we might be affected in 50 years, and includes how future generations may be affected by the decisions we make today. This is no easy situation. How can we possibly know how something is going to affect the 7th generation? We can’t, but that doesn’t mean anything goes unless we can definitively prove harm, nor should we aim for zero risk. Neither zero risk or anything goes is viable.

Instead, the Precautionary Principle is used where “scientific information is insufficient, inconclusive, or uncertain and where there are indications that the possible effects on the environment, or human, animal or plant health may be potentially dangerous and inconsistent

with the chosen level of protection."

The Precautionary Principle is part of risk management and the following general principles of risk management apply within the principle.

1. **Proportionality** means that the appropriate level of protection must be sought. Can we be protected from everything? I think not, but we can find a level of protection that gives us all a fair shot at a sustainable life now and in the future, without serious health and environmental crises.
2. **Non-discrimination** means that although there is not a one-size fits all solution, each solution must be comparable to similar situations. As stated in the Commissions Communications "comparable situations should not be treated differently and that different situations should not be treated in the same way, unless there are objective grounds for doing so.
3. **Consistency** means that we should look to what has already happened in similar situations and use similar approaches to make decisions.
4. **Examination of the benefits and costs of action and lack of action** This means that we must look at the pros and cons of both action and inaction to compare the likely consequences of each choice. This is a short-term and long-term benefits and cost analysis meant to look at the non-economic implications more so than the economic implications.

5. **The examination of scientific developments** is important as new information comes available based on further study. When measures are brought in based on unreliable, inadequate of inconclusive data, then those measures must be periodically reviewed based on new information. Once the information is more reliable, complete and accurate measures can be maintained, tightened or relaxed, as necessary.

The final aspect of the Precautionary Principle is the burden of proof. Currently for some industries such as pharmaceuticals the burden of proof is on the industry to prove the product "safe" before it can be put to market. Some industries market products that by their nature could be harmful and should then assume the burden of proof. In other industries, that do not have the same history or probability of potential harm, then it is up to consumers to sound the bell. Once the government has received sufficient information from consumers to doubt the safety of the product, the burden of proof can shift to the company.

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