

WHAT DOES THE WORLD FEAR MOST?

To find out, NUS institute partners Gallup on project that aims to survey over a million people from 160 countries in World Risk Poll



The research gathered in the project by Lloyd's Register Foundation Institute for the Public Understanding of Risk and Gallup can be used to shape policy and help people understand accurately the potential consequences of not vaccinating their child, for example.
PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Chang Ai-Lien
Science Editor

Financial, insurance and health issues are the three most pressing concerns on Singaporeans' minds, according to local research.

What about the rest of the world? In the most ambitious effort of its kind to date, a National University of Singapore (NUS) research institute is partnering global analytics firm Gallup to look into what individuals around the globe fear the most, and if this fear is warranted.

Understanding how risk is perceived and communicated will lay the groundwork for shaping national policy and, ultimately, help people live better, safer lives, the researchers believe.

"The world we are living in has become more complex and less predictable," said Professor Koh Chan Ghee, the new director of the \$37 million Lloyd's Register Foundation Institute for the Public Understanding of Risk at NUS, which had its official opening yesterday.

He explained that while people are increasingly facing different risks – from new technologies to climate change to emerging diseases, for instance – they are uncertain of how it will impact them.

In the Internet age, it is also easy for misinformation to spread and influence views, with very real conse-

quences. The United States, for one, is suffering a measles resurgence because parents are saying no to vaccines for their children, believing – contrary to scientific studies – that they could cause autism.

"This is all about helping them (individuals) weigh the benefit versus the potential harm and, to do that, we need to know the gap between perception of risk and expert assessment," said Prof Koh.

An earlier NUS study in China and India, for instance, showed that people overestimated the likelihood of events that seldom happened, such as death from terrorist attacks and food poisoning.

But they underestimated the likelihood of events with high true frequency, such as cybercrime.

Gallup global managing partner Jon Clifton noted: "Throughout people's everyday lives, they make decisions large and small that carry risk, both good and bad. Risk is such an ingrained part of the human experience, but how it impacts people's lives – and how they think and feel about it – is poorly understood on a global scale."

So the institute has signed a five-year agreement with Gallup on the project, which aims to survey over a million people from 160 countries in a World Risk Poll. The research can then be used to shape policy and help people understand accurately the potential consequences of, say,

HELPING PEOPLE ASSESS RISKS

This is all about helping them (individuals) weigh the benefit versus the potential harm and, to do that, we need to know the gap between perception of risk and expert assessment.



PROFESSOR KOH CHAN GHEE, the new director of the \$37 million Lloyd's Register Foundation Institute for the Public Understanding of Risk at NUS.

not vaccinating a child, or of doing nothing to mitigate global warming.

Assistant Professor Reuben Ng, lead scientist at the institute, has already been tracking what people here are concerned about through a big data platform that trawls through what is found online.

The new poll would not only help shape risk communication, but it could also enable messages and information to be tailored to different groups, he pointed out.

"Rather than having a one-size-fits-all approach, and one message for everyone, when we understand how different groups of people think, then we can communicate to each differently," said Prof Ng.

The multimillion-dollar collaboration is funded by the Lloyd's Register Foundation, a British charity that supports engineering-related education and research, and supports work that enhances the safety of life and property. It donated £10 million (\$17.4 million) towards setting up the institute.

The foundation's chief executive, Professor Richard Clegg, believes the latest effort will ultimately contribute to reducing risk and improving safety worldwide.

"We have got to understand the science of why people think and believe what they do. At the end of the day, it's about people," he said.

ailien@sph.com.sg