GLOBAL AFFAIRS

Ebola — contradictions between knowledge and communication

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If the possible effects of a threat are difficult to identify and seem far away it leaves a lot of space for seemingly trustworthy assessments and statements that, however, very often do not withstand a more detailed examination. The spectrum of the customary, reflexive statements can currently be seen in Europe and North America in reaction to the humanitarian catastrophe of the Ebola epidemic in the West African countries of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

A constant in the past weeks and months is the regular repetition of the statement that countries such as Germany are optimally equipped to handle this threat. Strongly worded and sweeping phrases are often heard which the normal citizen must interpret as a guarantee that there is no risk without any specific background knowledge. The representation in the media delivers a fireworks display of statements such as “risk is practically zero”, “probability is almost zero”, “one can definitely rule out” as well as “practically one hundred percent”.

The risk of dying of Ebola in Germany is certainly “extremely low” (to stay with this terminology). However, the risk of incorrectly communicating the risks is extremely high. The choice of words and the message between the lines must comply with petty accuracy and comprehensibly and correctly inform the citizen: The risk for any one individual citizen being threatened by Ebola is anything but low. This risk can quantitatively not be named reliably, but it certainly is far from “practically zero” if one considers the citizen as part of the German population. The probability that any one citizen of Germany will develop Ebola and show symptoms is very high, meaning almost one. Politicians and spokespersons of agencies regularly do not precisely differentiate between individual and population-based statements and this is usually uncritically reproduced by the media.

Statements on risks and probabilities near zero or one are very difficult to make. On the one hand, it is difficult to specify, since reliable data are often missing and, on the other hand, they often deal with politically very sensitive topics, making communication of the risk a particular challenge. This conflict situation can also be seen in the handling of the threat represented by the Ebola virus. Numerous articles, dealing with the contagion mechanisms, symptom development and transmission dynamics according to the respective state of knowledge, have been published since the first incident in the year 1976. Inevitably, the low number of cases and the difficult local conditions prevented any definite statements being developed by high-quality studies. There are a sufficient number of cases in the current crisis, however, broadening of the knowledge of the disease by studies is currently not something that can be asked, since the affected countries do not have the proper conditions in place for this and all resources must be used to keep the disease in check. Reporting 10,141 cases feigns precision that is not in place. That is the number of registered cases and

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The determinants of this are clear, but nobody knows how the development will look in detail. Combating the epidemic can only take place in the African countries. For humanitarian reasons there is no alternative to direct support by nursing personnel and physicians. Proportional to the rising number of external support personnel there will inevitably be more persons infected with Ebola and along with it outbreaks in Germany. If aid is refused — together with other countries — the epidemic cannot be controlled and more infected persons will enter European countries. Entry by infected persons cannot be avoided. In particular, entry cannot be avoided at airports via the checkpoint called entry screening, since this only identifies the small number of cases that are coincidentally at the airport at the time when the first symptoms are present. Outbreaks caused by the persons not identified at this time anywhere in the remotest of areas are likely. Explaining the correct behaviour to all affected parties in an unpredictable area must be part of the honest and complete education of the population.

In contrast, soothing, populist affirmations are counterproductive since they do not prepare the population for unavoidable situations. Immediately associated with this is the greatest danger of the current situation, namely the loss of credibility of the responsible authorities and institutions. That is certainly the most threatening thing that could happen. 2009 and H1N1 say hi.

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