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Review: Making Better Environmental Decisions: An Alternative to Risk Assessment
By Mary O'Brien

Reviewed by [Xavier E. Gros](#)
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O'Brien, Mary. *Making Better Environmental Decisions; An Alternative to Risk Assessment*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000. 352 pp. ISBN 0-262-65053-3 (softcover). US\$22.95 Recycled, chlorine-free paper

Greed, self-interest, lack of education and lack of respect for the environment are among the main causes of pollution and environmental contamination. Industrial development is still driven by cost considerations regardless of escalating pollution. The future of the planet and its inhabitants appears pretty gloomy. But Mary O'Brien does not only write about what's wrong, she also suggests alternatives and strategies to make things right. Well-written, jargon-free, easy to read, *Making Better Environmental Decisions* makes risk assessment and its alternatives accessible to a large audience. There is no doubt that this book will upset supporters and beneficiaries of risk assessment. But then again, that is what is intended.

Making Better Environmental Decisions is divided into three sections. In the first, the author concentrates on identifying the weaknesses of risk assessment. Its abuses and impact on the environment are illustrated through numerous case studies. O'Brien reveals how, based on current approaches to risk assessment, governments have authorized companies to contaminate the air, poison wildlife, pollute groundwater, etc., to such an extent that one may question the value of risk assessment, its supposed impartial approach, and most of all why there have been so few actions to fight environmental abuses, and, finally, why an even smaller number of actions have succeeded.

Alternatives to risk assessment are proposed in section two. O'Brien demonstrates that risk assessment of certain industrial processes is often performed without considering existing environmentally friendly options. These greener alternatives to more polluting technologies are very rarely considered or adopted without active support of the population and direct involvement of citizens at a local, national or international level.

The third and last section deals with "making the shift to alternatives assessment." The barriers against alternatives assessment are highlighted and potential actions to be taken are proposed. This section is rather dubious. It seems that all the vigor and exertion used in the first two parts

to point out the limitations of risk assessment have vanished to give way to a more conciliatory approach for a transition from risk to alternatives assessment. O'Brien does not shy away from painting a rather bleak picture of the future of our ecosystem, in which few could believe that many options to save the earth exist. Certain paragraphs could even be perceived as condescending, as though readers still needed to be convinced of the benefit of switching to alternatives assessment, or would not be capable of making decisions that will call for effective actions.

One thing that O'Brien's text highlights is that policy changes will not come from governments, who are more concerned with protecting their own self-interest rather than looking after the welfare of society. Policy changes will occur under pressure from electors. That policy makers do not care about the citizens is not new. That someone dares to write a book about ongoing inadequate policies is not either. What is interesting is that O'Brien proposes alternatives in *Making Better Environmental Decisions*.

From the claims made in this book, one could take the concept further and realise that it is not only risk assessment that would have to mutate to save the planet, but the way industrial development is managed, the integrity of risk assessors, the morality of industrial claims, and the trustworthiness of political institutions. I believe all this can only be achieved through a complete reshuffling of the whole educational system and mentalities. We will have to throw back into question our entire lifestyle. I doubt many are ready for it.

Making Better Environmental Decisions is not the first book that calls for action. Let's hope it will be the last.

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