

*Essentiel
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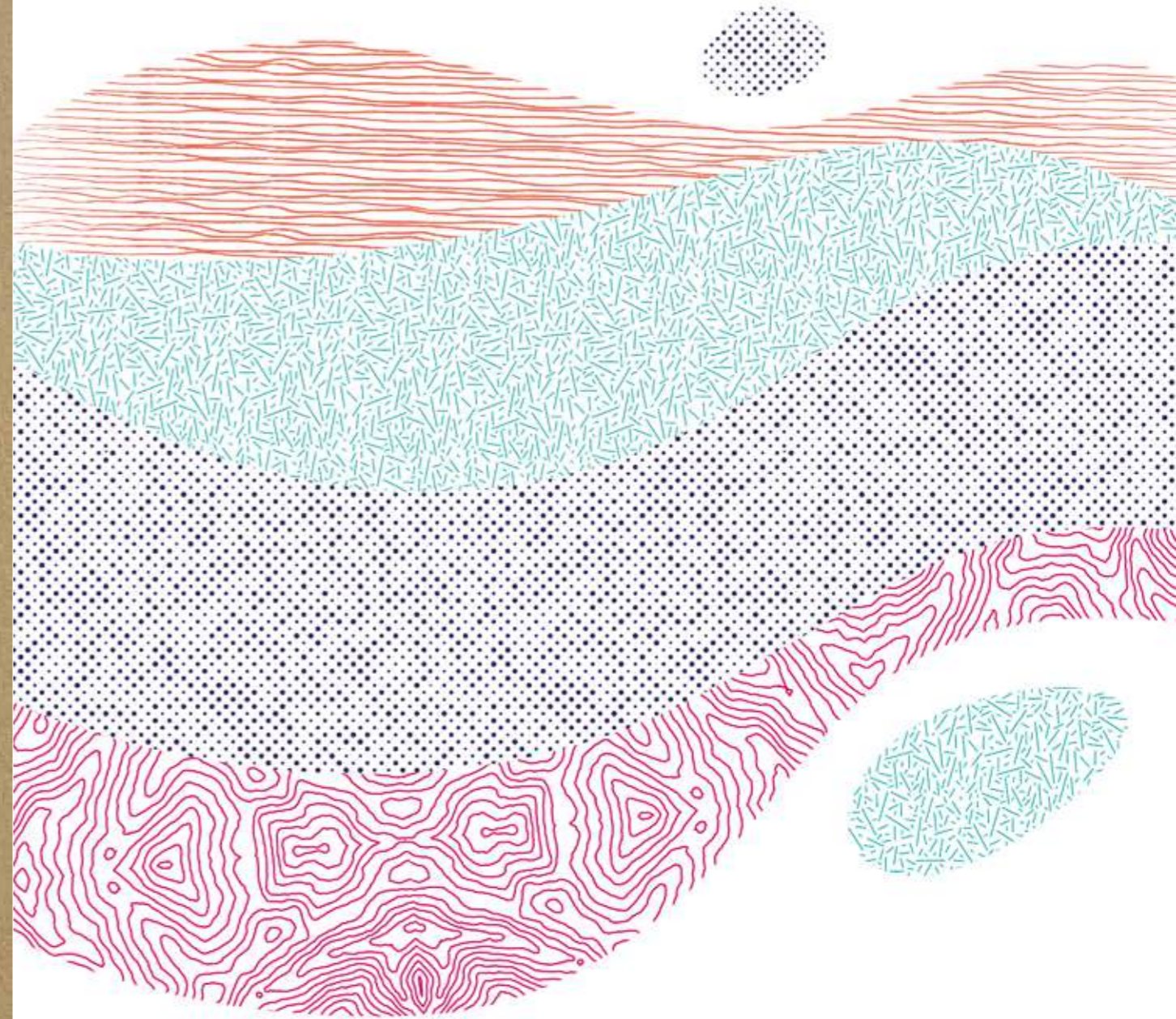
10
YEARS

OF RESEARCH
GOING TO THE HEART OF
VULNERABILITIES

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3

Risks & Disasters



KEY FIGURES

13

funded research projects

9

geographical areas



Preventing and responding to disasters is a crucial component of the humanitarian mission of the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, particularly in light of climate change. When reformulating action and response strategies for those impacted by natural disasters, it is essential to recognise that such disasters are social and political phenomena.

HUMANITARIAN ISSUES

Individuals and communities can be devastated by natural disasters. The frequency, complexity, and severity of their consequences will likely worsen due to climate change, migrations, armed conflicts, rapid and unrestrained urbanisation, technological hazards, and public health emergencies. The contexts surrounding these occurrences are becoming increasingly complex, as countries struck by natural disasters may be simultaneously plagued by armed conflict or large-scale migrations¹.

According to the 2022 World Disasters Report², natural disasters are occurring more frequently, mainly because of climate change and extreme weather events, as indicated by an analysis that highlighted the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on many countries already exposed to cyclones, floods, droughts, and heat waves. These are not sporadic occurrences, and communities are becoming increasingly vulnerable as they reappear locally. Consequently, natural disasters and armed conflicts can mutually reinforce one another, mainly because countries already grappling with instability, armed conflict, and violence are often more vulnerable to disasters due to ineffective government action. In addition, the risks of disaster can be worsened by existing tensions, increasing the likelihood of violence³.

Beyond the pure sciences that explain climate-related and meteorological events, humanities and social sciences play a fundamental role in improving our understanding of disaster management and fostering community resilience. In fact, "a climate-related or geological event only becomes a disaster when people are situated in its trajectory and experience its consequences"⁴. While disasters are essentially the outcome of societal vulnerabilities, only technical means can provide relief.

Sociologists have analysed the effects of disasters on social cohesion and individual mental health to understand better and respond to these events. Anthropologists have shed light on the belief systems and cultural practices that shape individuals' perceptions of risk exposure and subsequent responses to natural disasters. With this in mind, the Foundation has consistently supported

researchers in the humanities and social sciences to offer fresh viewpoints, open the doors for effective action, and spark debate on public policies and the significance of comprehending specific local contexts.

Which actions should be taken to help the residents of Reunion Island better cope with the impact of cyclones? What kind of actions should these be?

What humanitarian flood relief in Niger can help people break free from the cycle of poverty?

How do urban heat islands impact people's health in Côte d'Ivoire?

How do Syrian refugees and the Lebanese host population perceive flood risks?

What do the multitudes of unseen, underprivileged, and neglected people left on the wayside in the aftermath of natural disasters have to tell us?

TOWARDS A BETTER UNDERSTANDING

1. THE SOCIO-POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF NATURAL DISASTERS

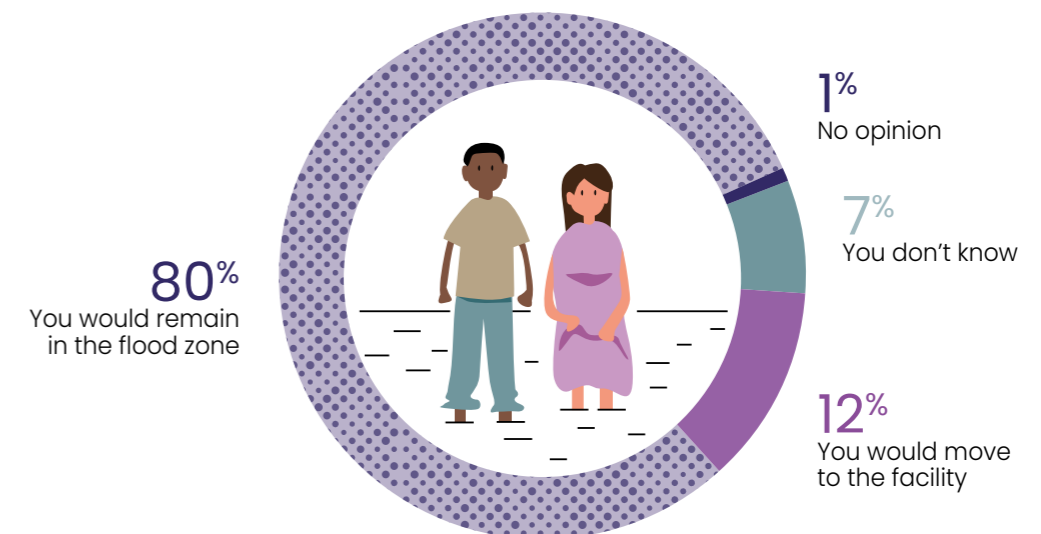
The impact of climate change on our civilisation has become a tangible reality and a global threat. In recent decades, the frequency of natural disasters – cyclones, heat waves, excessive rainfall – has increased. But these natural phenomena are, above all, social processes as well.

To enhance the resilience of communities in the face of disasters, it is imperative to possess a comprehensive understanding of the socio-cultural attributes of the geographical areas in question. From this perspective, in 2021, geographer **Adam ABDOU ALOU** conducted his research in Niger. In this country, floods are

the second-most destructive form of natural disaster after droughts. In Niamey, floodwaters have inundated mainly the fifth arrondissement of the district on the right bank of the Niger River. The researcher's investigation, conducted via interviews and field surveys, has demonstrated that floods, in conjunction with other elements of vulnerability within the population, contribute to entrapping or maintaining people within a cycle of poverty.

His study also focuses on supportive actions public authorities and humanitarian actors have taken since 2012. It underscores the notion that responses not predicated on local knowledge or the community's real needs will not enable people to break free from the vicious cycle of poverty or develop their capacity for greater resilience. His research delves even deeper by pointing to the social risks generated by humanitarian aid, which can make communities socially and economically more vulnerable, particularly relocation programmes aimed at moving people to more secure areas.

“ If the government offered to relocate you to a secure and well-equipped facility with NGO assistance



Results sourced from data gathered by researcher Adam ABDOU ALOU



Adam ABDOU ALOU
Doctor in Geography

When the authorities took us to the Séno site, there was no water, electricity, or schools for our children. They would sell us a 25-litre water container for 125 FCFA (€0.19) and a barrel for 1,000 (€1.53). However, in other city districts, the same 25 litres of water cost 25 FCFA (€0.038), and the same barrel costs 200 FCFA (€0.31). This situation obliged most of us to return to the flood zone even though each family has a 200-square-metre plot at this site”⁶

Statement gathered from interviews by researcher Adam ABDOU ALOU

In 2020, on the other side of the world, **Annabelle MOATTY** examined reconstruction on the island of Saint-Martin following the passage of Hurricane Irma in 2017. Her work explores the imperatives of the “build back better” movement that has taken hold in recent decades. It envisages periods of post-disaster reconstruction as “windows of opportunity” for strengthening societies’ resilience and ability to adapt. Her work questions the “ethical and preventive” aspect of reconstruction, analyses the island’s vulnerabilities and studies the mechanisms of spontaneous solidarity, including from the viewpoint of teenagers.



Annabelle MOATTY
Doctor in Geography and Land Use Planning

Following a disaster, it is possible to analyse the factors that lead to the closure of the “window of opportunity” for reconstruction or the actions that can be undertaken to reopen it. The idea is to understand how solidarity mechanisms generate greater resilience, such as the capacity to cope with a disaster, to recover and regroup.”⁶

Statement gathered from an interview by researcher Annabelle MOATTY

According to her research, the aggregation of structural, organisational, and socio-economic vulnerabilities can eventually amplify the impacts of climate-related events. It also indicates that the potential for reconstruction may be limited and that ensuing underlying conflicts stemming from disparities in regional economic development can resurface. The island is currently encountering strong social tension. At the same time, Annabelle MOATTY highlights the spontaneous expressions of solidarity exhibited by many teenagers. Her work calls for developing educational and cooperative programmes with pre-existing non-profit structures so that young people’s social ties and words of solidarity can be better channelled and given greater recognition in the context of risk exposure and disaster management.

Geographer **Maimouna YMBA** explored the socio-political dimension of disasters in her 2022 study on the impact of urban heat islands (UHI) on public health in Côte d’Ivoire. In her epidemiological survey of a sample of 1,066 people in Abidjan, she identified the neighbourhoods most exposed to the risk of this threat and the socio-sanitary impact of UHIs on residents. According to her research, there is a correlation between the high density of buildings, the dangers caused by UHIs, and the health of residents who suffer from severe migraines, extreme fatigue, dry cough, vertigo, loss of consciousness, and chest pain. Maimouna YMBA suggests how residents can become more resilient to urban life by greening spaces, developing early warning systems and applying construction standards. She concludes that managing household waste and improving wastewater treatment must become a priority when discussing operational matters.

The environmental and systemic dimensions of disasters were also explored in 2019 by geographer **Djiby SAMBOU** through his study on the socio-ecological resilience of vulnerable communities in the Senegal River delta. His research points to the inadequate capacity of public authorities and communities to forecast disasters, issue alerts, prepare responses, and provide relief. Moreover, by probing into the concept of socio-ecological resilience, he argues for a systemic approach that can minimise a community’s exposure to hazards and, at the same time, offer support for people to adjust to climate change and foster sustainable environmental practices over the medium and long term.

Beyond Theory: “Resilience” at the Core of Humanitarian Action

The concept of resilience has generated growing enthusiasm within the humanitarian sector over the past decade. Resilience is defined as the capacity for a system, a community, or a society exposed to hazards to resist, mitigate, alleviate, and overcome the impact of a threat in a timely and effective manner, notably by maintaining and rebuilding its essential structures and functions⁷. Similarly, in its report on resilience, the French Red Cross defines this concept as “the capacity of an individual, an organisation, or a society to withstand and cope with adversities and disturbances and to progress in relation to them”⁸. Resilience is a function of a system’s vulnerability and adaptability (Dalziell and McManus 2004).

This notion also possesses the noteworthy advantage of integrating the temporal dimension of emergency relief and development with the idea of recovery and transformation. The integration of the concept of resilience into the policies and strategic plans of various stakeholders is facilitated by this interconnection. However, there exists a constraint in attempting to assess resilience. Resilience of what? Resilience for whom?

Empirical research therefore needs to be carried out to grasp the complexity of disaster governance better and understand the economic, social, political, and cultural factors that contribute to the vulnerability and the resilience of communities.



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2. PERCEPTIONS, CONCEPTS AND MEMORIES OF DISASTERS

To effectively mitigate the effects of disasters, the efforts of public authorities and civil society must be based not only on a thorough risk analysis but also on how communities perceive and conceive of risk and their capacity to attain and/or restore balance.

In 2023, with this objective in mind, geographer **Modou NDIAYE** explored how climate migrants and the population of the Langue de Barbarie in the Saint-Louis region of Senegal perceive health hazards and adapt to climate change. His research indicates that climate change will have a detrimental impact on their health. Today, several diseases whose prevalence is decreasing are resurfacing and persisting, such as malaria, asthma, diarrheal disorders, acute malnutrition caused by inadequate rainfall, rheumatism, etc. His research further reveals that local inhabitants know the river’s dynamics and the role of wetlands, lakes, and lagoons in wildlife conservation and attracting tourists. However, the Langue de Barbarie has been viewed strictly from an economic perspective, where local people give the systemic interface dynamics between land and water little value.

This researcher also recalls that communities have developed multiple adaptation strategies to survive climate-related hazards, such as socio-professional reorientation and domestic migration, as frequently chosen options. This is an unsettling new humanitarian trend both for these climate migrants and for their families left behind.

“



Modou NDIAYE
Doctor in Geography

You can see that there are no healthcare facilities in the village, and it’s only recently that we’ve been connected to running water and electricity that we’ve had to pay for ourselves (...). Our place of worship is right where we’re talking, and as you can see, it’s just a makeshift shack.”⁹

Statement gathered from an interview by Modou NDIAYE

Similarly, in 2021, the geologist **Yves MAZABRAUD** studied people's conceptions of risk exposure in the face of crises and gathered their recollections of natural disasters in the Lesser Antilles. A wide range of natural hazards threaten these regions, such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and landslides, droughts, floods, rising sea levels, storms, and hurricanes. This researcher devised a model for his study to identify the optimal educational resources for individuals. According to the study's findings, preventive actions should consider people's perceptions, which may vary according to age and gender. In addition, it is noted that the accounts of past disasters and climatic events have been inadequately transmitted from one generation to the next, thus making it challenging to raise awareness among younger individuals. Moreover, the researcher observes that people in the Lesser Antilles refrain from acknowledging the potential occurrence of cascading climate-related risks.

The perception of climate risks (in a physical sense) and their conceptualisation (in terms of a more abstract relationship with the world) are influenced by the memory formation process. **Francisca ESPINOZA**, a psychologist and sociologist, defines disaster memory as a set of representations of a prior catastrophic event. It consists of memories and fragments of memories of experiences that have been lived through, then transmitted, individually or collectively, as part of an ongoing process of reconstructing the past. This memory contains information on the effects of climate disasters and the means for preventing or mitigating their future impact. The potential actions that memory can bring about depend on whether the memory is passive, active, or traumatic.

“In contrast to external models, the memory of natural disasters has the advantage of contextualising resilience through knowledge of past climate-related events that have afflicted the area. Through this process, the memory process facilitates the coming together of experts and locals, and this mutual recognition serves as the foundation for the co-construction of site-specific resilience.”¹⁰

Researcher Francisca ESPINOZA

The results of her research on the impact of cyclones on the island of Reunion in 2019 have improved our understanding of the complexity of disaster memory: its short-term capacity, its methodology, and, most importantly, the need for it to be maintained so that it can effectively carry out its task of ensuring disaster prevention and proactive resilience.

RESEARCHER FOCUS

Active Memory that Impacts the Present

When managing the effects of a natural disaster, its psychological dimension is sometimes overlooked. The risk is that those who have gone through the harrowing experience of a disaster are burdened with enduring and distressing aftereffects. However, if the memory of these traumatic events is preserved, it can ultimately help develop genuine collective resilience.

One convinced proponent of this view is Francisca ESPINOZA, Doctor in Sociology and member of the Institute for the History and Memory of Disasters (IHMEC). She has succeeded in proving her point through different case examples, such as the transmission of the history of Augusto Pinochet's regime in Chile by individuals who were children during his dictatorship or of the recollection of "natural" disasters by the residents of the island of Reunion.

Sharing past traumatic experiences leads to imparting knowledge stored in each individual's memory that can be used to develop resilience and serve as a lever for anticipating and preparing for future catastrophes. However, to evoke active memory that may impact the present requires it to be kept alive, brought up to date, and activated. Francisca ESPINOZA emphasises the role of artists, stating that **"it is essential that what supports the retention of memory must be expressed through creative and innovative forms that relate to a population, and that precisely affects its sensitivity through art and culture."**



Francisca ESPINOZA
Doctor in Sociology

ACTING MORE EFFECTIVELY

1. INTERSECTING CLIMATE VULNERABILITIES: INSECURITY, POLLUTION, AND CHAIN DISASTERS

When climatic hazards afflict regions already impacted by multiple vulnerability factors, they produce chain disasters triggered by a combination of other disasters. Studying these phenomena is essential for humanitarian and social action professionals who can better prepare for and respond to crisis-related vulnerability factors.

In relation to this, in 2023, geographer **Cassandre REY-THIBAUT** directed a research project that carried out a state-of-the-art and a documentary analysis to determine whether integrated disaster management is currently used or can be used to manage epidemics and pandemics. This in-depth investigation mainly dealt with the feasibility of aligning or combining systems, practices, and concrete management experiences with each other.

Similarly, in 2022, the Foundation funded the research project led by geographer **Cheikh FAYE** on the flood resilience of the population of Ziguinchor, Senegal. This urban area, currently experiencing a population boom, is exposed to extreme hydrological events and unpredictable climate fluctuations. The aggregation of climate-related threats has consequently led to diverse social tensions. This study examines how communities react to recurrent flooding by describing their vulnerabilities and capacity for resilience. As the frequency and severity of natural disasters continue to rise, people will have less time to recover between two events, and should several disasters occur concurrently, a cumulative effect will ensue. Furthermore, the author observes numerous social tensions arising in relation to the availability of natural resources in these regions, as well as a growing sense of uncertainty among households for their future.

Finally, according to research conducted by **Dima EL KHOURY** in 2022 on the perception of risks and social cohesiveness in Lebanon among Syrian refugees and local communities, for both populations, insecurity and pollution are vital concerns that rank ahead of flooding. Insecurity and pollution may exacerbate public health and prevention issues because “communities, unaware of the significance of river conservation, fail to address waste management”.

Her research findings reinforce the idea that disasters are not only the result of natural causes but also of the socio-economic environment in which they occur. A community’s greater vulnerability to disasters can be ascribed to various social factors, such as population growth, the composition and distribution of the population, social diversity, etc. This study reminds us that the social and economic fabric of communities in high-risk areas must be considered when attempting to develop a population’s capacity for resilience and preparedness in the face of natural disasters. Communities and individuals, especially those most exposed to risk, must be the focus of this comprehensive approach to risk reduction.

2. LOCAL OR INTERNATIONAL, PRIVATE OR PUBLIC SECTORS: WHO ARE RESPONSE ACTORS?

Climate-related disasters present complex, multi-dimensional challenges with no unique or definitive solution. A holistic approach must involve all people and institutions concerned to resolve this.

From this perspective, in 2018, anthropologist **Georges DJOHY** investigated the dynamics of humanitarian aid in the flooded regions of the far north of Benin. His study questions the extent to which the actions of the Beninese government and its partners – development agencies and NGOs – have been limited in providing help to communities threatened by flooding in the agroecological areas of this region. Because despite the deployment of numerous projects and resources, the situation has deteriorated to the point where a growing section of the local population has become marginalised and impoverished.

This research questions whether the localisation of humanitarian aid is pertinent when evaluating the legitimacy of the actors involved. Taking the case of two towns regularly impacted by flooding, this investigator illustrates the extent to which humanitarian aid is structured around decentralised local municipalities, humanitarian NGOs, and beneficiaries.



Aid is viewed here as a resource for afflicted communities to develop resilience, which can also be diverted and channelled towards those in power. In the context of humanitarian transition and following the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit commitments, the author highlights the consequences of blindly localising aid provision, especially whenever “the village’s new powers to be” in rural Benin step in to have their say.

By examining the perceptions of aid recipients impacted by flooding, the author aims to elucidate how certain aid situations can lead to arrangements that give providers greater flexibility in reallocating aid. From the beneficiaries’ point of view, local municipalities are seen as political and partisan entities that cannot safeguard values and freedom of action like “humanitarian professionals” do.

Finally, this research highlights that victims are not necessarily receptive to a definitive resolution of their flooding problems because it would lead to discontinuing aid distribution. Consequently, this leads to acknowledging the significance of coupling emergency interventions with long-term development projects.

RESEARCHER FOCUS

A Pioneer “Agropologist”

Georges DJOHY satisfied his desire to pursue his professional training soon after his agricultural engineering studies ended by turning to his primary interest, the human and social sciences. **“I first specialised in sociology and rural economics before becoming excited about anthropology, its purpose, approaches, and methods. I had the opportunity to work on a thesis at the Institute of Anthropology, Social and Cultural Studies at the University of Göttingen in Germany.”**

Today, Georges DJOHY advocates the benefits of “stepping beyond the compartmentalisation of disciplines to move forward”. First, from a scientific point of view, to “better understand how climate risks are dealt with in rural areas, where agriculture and livestock farming are the main socio-economic activities, and where climate-related hazards and unpredictable events – floods, droughts, strong winds, fires, etc. – may tend to converge. But also, from the point of view of humanitarian action, “I want to be both an agronomist and an anthropologist,” he says, “to give a human, social dimension to my research on the practices of humanitarian aid and the perception of beneficiaries”. “If this defines me as an “agropologist” or an “anthroponomist”, so be it.”



Georges DJOHY
Doctor in Anthropology

In 2017, **Christiane RAFIDINARIVO**, a political scientist, was interested in studying another local player, the State, this time through a research project of the National Office for Risk and Disaster Management in Madagascar. The results of her research highlight that families, communities, and local organisations are not only the first to respond, but they also play a vital role in adapting to increasing exposure to risks. Understanding local leaders and integrating community perspectives into local and national planning processes, especially those of groups most vulnerable to climate risks, is critical. The acquisition of local knowledge is crucial, but it should not eclipse a more global thought process on the localisation of aid in the context of a worldwide crisis, such as the climate crisis, whose extreme weather patterns are afflicting regions ever more devastatingly than before.

Pursuing the same objective of studying new ways of “doing” humanitarian work, in 2018, **Mariama NOUHOU KOUTCHA** studied an innovative system implemented in West Africa to safeguard communities against climatic hazards. Focusing on the consequences of recurrent droughts in Niger, she reports that, according to the literature, climate risk insurance is the climate management tool that has been the most studied. According to her results, the most significant determinant of emergency aid for farmers is quantitative: amounts of money and quantities of grain. More surprisingly, the speed at which aid is delivered is also a valued factor because however modest a sum of money or food, it is offset by the distribution rate. Furthermore, farmers also seem to prefer international organisations (international NGOs and UN agencies) to the State and national NGOs.

Mariama NOUHOU KOUTCHA’s work also reveals other realities: most of the questioned farmers favour climate risk insurance to protect themselves from drought. They are more sensitive to climate-related hazards as this risk grows, and the higher their level of education, the more likely they are to perceive this risk. However, climate insurance is too costly, as they cannot afford the market rate. Her study also explores the option of allocating targeted humanitarian assistance to help them afford this insurance.

AND TOMORROW?



Interview with...

Sandrine REVET
Doctor in Anthropology

Sandrine REVET was awarded a doctorate in Anthropology at the Institut des Hautes Etudes de l’Amérique Latine. She received a research prize from the Red Cross Foundation in 2019 and is currently a member of its scientific council. She specialises in examining the actors and the social/political dynamics involved in the “natural” disaster process.

How does disaster anthropology differ from other approaches to the study of disasters?

Anthropology has historically called into question the very qualification of what constitutes a disaster. Anthropologists have been interested in how societies qualify certain events as disasters without limiting themselves to purely quantitative criteria, such as the number of victims or the measurable extent of damage. In this way, they have made it possible to move away from purely quantified assessments and consider beneficiaries’ and social groups’ diverse perceptions and interpretations of the events. Anthropology also helps broaden the spectrum of research by including not only the local population and local actors but also the diverse range of humanitarians, the media, businesses, political activists, etc.

How does the anthropology of disasters use cultural perspectives to understand community responses to disasters?

Some anthropologists use a culturalist reading to understand people and communities' responses in the face of disasters. However, this "risk culture" approach must not ignore political, economic, and social issues. It is important not to reduce community responses to their culture, as this may mask problems of choice or non-choice, inequities, or even resources. The State's role is crucial in understanding societies' response to disasters. Available resources and societal organisation have a significant impact on community responses.

It is essential to understand that people can draw on their cultural resources to give meaning to what they are going through while implementing measures that minimise exposure to future risk. For example, one can fully explain a disaster as being the instrument of divine punishment, yet at the same time, take preventive action, build protective infrastructure, or participate in preparedness exercises. This is precisely what anthropologists work on to pinpoint the complexity of local situations.

In your opinion, what are the significant challenges and issues to be addressed by social science researchers to come up with answers in the coming years?

Social scientists, like everyone else, face significant challenges. First, it is essential to look at the materiality of events, particularly with regard to disasters. The social sciences have tended to consider these events only as social phenomena. Still, it is crucial to understand how these phenomena's materiality influences aid providers and people's perceptions.

A disaster's materiality refers to how catastrophic events, such as a natural or technological disaster, have a tangible impact on people, communities, and physical environments. This includes material loss, damage to infrastructure, destruction of natural habitats and changes in environmental conditions. In the face of their challenges, researchers in disaster anthropology can draw inspiration from the current position taken by particular social

sciences by being mindful of this materiality. Considering how water behaves during a flood or lava spreads during a volcanic eruption is essential to understand what is happening on the ground.



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