

Climate change and global warming are making us more exposed to disasters that are having an unprecedented impact on how we live. Almost every day we hear about floods that are becoming increasingly common in countries around the world, including Sudan, New Mexico in the United States, Slovakia, Greece, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom. What may surprise us is that despite advances in knowledge and the development of technocratic strategies to mitigate the effects of disasters, we are becoming more vulnerable to them. This project aims to improve our understanding of why natural catastrophes continue to wreak havoc to our livelihoods and environment. Specifically, we seek to explore the cultural aspects of disasters by looking at how different people understand and interpret disasters, and what consequences these interpretations may have for how they cope with, respond to, and prevent future disasters and risks.

Why do we adopt a socio-cultural framework? Because culture plays a dual role in disaster management. It acts as a source of knowledge about previous catastrophes, norms of mutual aid and values of safety, and can therefore help us to mitigate the effects of disasters. Concomitantly, however, culture can also contribute to increased risk of disaster through placing emphasis on values associated with profits, commercialisation and modernisation as opposed to public safety. We argue that disasters are therefore 'revelatory crises' in that they expose dysfunctions in the way we organise our daily lives.

We plan to conduct our research in Poland and Japan to see how people in both countries interpret disasters, how they cope with them and how they prevent future risks. Furthermore, we will also examine whether people in the two countries have differing understandings of disasters due to their differing experiences of disasters and response characteristics. In particular, we will focus on two flood events: the recent flood in southern Poland and the 2020 flood in Japan.

In this project, a team of four researchers will use their expertise in different research methods to collect a range of empirical material with the aim of improving our understanding of the following research questions:

1. How are recent flood disasters and their causes understood by different people in Poland and Japan, including affected citizens, public opinion, policy makers and disaster policies, as well as experts in climate and hydrological infrastructure? How are these incidents narrated? How are alternative and multiple disaster narratives contested and negotiated?
2. When it comes to mitigating the impact of flood disaster, which measures and policies do different people prioritise?
3. To what extent is awareness of climate change influencing the recovery process and the design of flood control measures?
4. What are the similarities and differences between the two different disaster contexts studied, Japan and Poland?

We plan to carry out more than 80 in-depth interviews with citizens, policy makers and experts on the flood disaster and hydrological infrastructure. We will also conduct ethnographic research to observe how people negotiate their interpretations of the disaster and how this affects the recovery process on the ground.

A cross-national comparison will facilitate our understanding of the ways in which particular cultural practices and structures influence the recovery process, and the implications this has for the management of future hazards across time and context. This project will make a substantial contribution to disaster studies by focusing on a problem that has been insufficiently researched: the social construction of climate-induced floods. The findings will be published in international journals and presented at international conferences in Europe and Japan.