

## **Risk and Africa – Conceptualizing risk in the context of contemporary Africa**

International Symposium 27-29 November 2008, Bayreuth, Germany

### **Call for papers**

The relationship between risk and modernity has stimulated controversial debates about the changing nature of risk and the dynamics of contemporary society. While it is acknowledged that modern society, through technological development, has been successful in using risk to improve livelihoods, there is also widespread consensus over the costs of such improvements in the form of ecological degradation, industrial hazards and exaggerated societal expectations. Therefore, even though the general assumption is that modern society has been largely successful in dealing with risk it is still felt that the future of modern societies depends on their ability to identify and adopt suitable approaches to manage risk, deal with uncertainty and develop pathways towards sustainability. However, it is important to note that the current debate on the concepts of risk and “risk society” is heavily skewed in favour of European historical experience.

By distinguishing between concepts of risk in modern to late-modern societies and those in the rest of the world the debate drives a perhaps unintended and possibly unwarranted epistemological wedge between North and South. In other words, the debate would seem to suggest that the concept of risk refers to fundamentally different empirical and epistemological objects: “Here” we talk about manufactured technological risks, environmental awareness and the social construction of risk as symptoms of reflexive modernity. “There” the focus is on vulnerability, natural hazards and coping strategies in the context of state failure, disintegrating markets and (more or less) pre-modern societies. However, this wedge can be questioned on two accounts. Firstly, increasing awareness of technological hazards, pollution and climate change, especially in urban Africa, as well as the introduction of new forms of insurance and the restructuring of civil society are just some of the recent developments that appear to invite us to be sceptical of prevailing notions of risk and their (ir)relevance to and in Africa. Secondly, the conceptualization of risk in Africa – just as in any other parts of the South – cannot be done in isolation, for there is a sense in which the success or failure of attempts at dealing with risk elsewhere inheres with Africa. In other words, issues concerning uneven development, increased economic exchange and cooperation as well as environmental and developmental discourses need to be addressed in an increasingly globalising world.

In exploring new ways of conceptualising risk in Africa the symposium will seek to address the challenge of making theoretical and methodological advances in risk research relevant to an understanding of processes of social change in the continent. Contributions are invited which explore this relevance in different fields (social, political, environmental, etc.) and from different perspectives (geography, sociology, economy, social anthropology, ecology, etc.).

Research-based contributions are particularly welcome, including studies of cases from outside of the African continent for comparisons.

Papers are invited on one or several of the following topics:

Theories of risk and their relevance to the African context  
Risk as a catalyst of social transformation  
Risk, resilience and sustainability  
Risk perception and communication  
Risk, governance and power  
Risk and environmental change in Africa  
Development and risk production  
Risk and uncertainty

A post-conference publication of selected papers is planned.

**Deadline for abstracts** (up to 600 words): 30 June 2008.  
Acceptance notifications will be emailed by mid July.

The Symposium is organised by ZENEB, the Centre for Natural Risks and Development. ZENEB is based at the Department of Population and Social Geography at the University of Bayreuth and serves as a social science oriented research network on risks and disasters in developing countries.

The main objectives of ZENEB are: (i) to implement, promote and support research in order to acquire scientific knowledge on disaster prevention and disaster coping in developing countries, (ii) to link scientists that do research in the field of disasters and development, (iii) to provide an overview on German and international risk and disaster related research in developing countries with a regional focus on Africa, (iv) to advance innovative methods of integrated analysis of the interactions between complex natural and social systems under the impact of extreme events.

Further information and application:  
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ZENEB will try to provide financial support for selected presenters from Africa.

Organizers:

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