

ZiF-Research Group *Communicating Disaster***Closing Conference “Dealing with the Disasters of Others”**

26-28 January 2012

Presentation:

***The Role of Information in Disasters:
What Can We Learn from the 2011 Japan Earthquake?***

Birgit Velte, German Red Cross – Headquarters, Berlin

Date & Time: Saturday, 28 January 2012, 10:15

Location: Center for Interdisciplinary Research, Bielefeld, Germany; Room 222 “Plenarsaal”

Abstract:

The earthquake in Japan in March 2011 with its following tsunami has hit not just a ‘high income country’ but one of the world's best prepared for disasters. It revealed the limits of disaster preparedness as its scale and complex consequences exceeded the expected. Japan relies on a highly sophisticated emergency response system with one of the strongest Red Cross Societies in terms of disaster response. It is capable to mobilize medical teams, rescue people from danger and treat the injured. The system has proven highly reliable and is comparable to most European countries.

But when a large-scale disaster ‘beyond the expected’ leads to a breakdown of infrastructure, people are forced to help themselves for a longer period of time. The disaster in Japan has demonstrated very clearly that information can become the crucial resource in a disaster! We know that information is important in any emergency: Information about the situation and hazards, about where to get further information and help and not to forget the information about the well-being of our families and friends. But if public services are disrupted, help is not provided on demand, the focus and aim of information shift towards simply surviving by giving guidance on individual behaviour. And information is no longer simple data. It has to lead to a behavioural change among the affected population, they must follow the advice. The question then becomes how can we communicate and mediate information in the communities?

The affected population is highly dependent on information, but information is only getting through – and especially only leads to a change in personal behaviour – if its source is perceived as trustworthy. Which actors - e. g. governmental institutions, non-governmental organisations and companies - are responsible to give information? And are they (seen as) reliable? This depends on the possibility of getting reliable data as well as on the reputation and the communications strategies. Different actors have different access to data, different communication strategies and different objectives when communicating. How do they coordinate? How do we create and handle the resource of ‘information’?

For further questions on the conference or the research group,
please contact the research group assistant:
Marén Schorch
Center for Interdisciplinary Research (ZiF)

Tel.: +49 (0)521 106-2776
communicating_disaster@uni-bielefeld.de