

# Preface

The fact that information is available does not necessarily mean that those who receive it are well informed. Nor does the fact that information is being circulated mean that it will be taken up by those who could make good use of it. This has become apparent during the various crises and disasters that have shaken our planet in recent years. For this reason, any reflection focussing solely on the receipt of the information, the production of the information or the means of communication is bound to be fragmented. The book you are now holding is the final element of a project that started in 2006 with the formation of a special research team and the submission of a request for funding to the Geneva International Academic Network (GIAN) – called SNIS (Swiss Network for International Studies) since 2008. This request, and the project that was then funded, put forward an innovative approach intended to highlight the conditions required to achieve a satisfactory information flow in areas related to risk, through close observation of the way this information is collected, indexed, processed, distributed and used. One of the principles on which the project was based was Bateson's definition of information as "a difference that makes a difference" (1972). Given that such a difference only makes sense in a universe of meaning, or in a specific context, achieving the objective of the project required an interdisciplinary team and multiple research sites. Only with such a wide range of perspectives, methods and contexts related to the "risks" would it be possible to take a fresh look at the circulation of information in a way which goes beyond the limits of a given discipline or individual local characteristics. Thus, at the instigation of Professor Valérie November, a research team was formed combining geographers specialising in risk, sociologists working in the field of science and techniques, and psychologists specialising in intercultural research methods. As expected, the project is founded on a sound theoretical basis and a thorough methodological procedure; these will also be presented in this book.

A project of this nature would have been impossible without the necessary contacts in various regions of the world, and in the governmental and non-

governmental organisations involved in risk management. The GIAN's mission is precisely to promote interaction between university institutions and international organisations. The research team could be assured of the cooperation of various bodies:

- The World Health Organisation (WHO), in the person of David L. Heymann M.D., Assistant Director-General – Health Security and Environment
- The Secretariat of the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UN/ISDR), in the persons of Silvano Briceño and Marie-Lou Darricau, at the time respectively the director and library manager of the Secretariat
- The *Bureau National de Gestion des Risques et des Catastrophes* of the government of Madagascar, in the person of Claire Rahasinirina
- The non-governmental organisations Medair (Nicolas Crettenand; Antananarivo, Madagascar), the WESDE Association (Léopold Kemkeng; Maroua, Cameroon) and PROSENAT (Jacques Unkap; Yaoundé, Cameroon)

This collaboration made it possible to include in a single research project three areas, each of which, in its own way, has to produce, process or distribute risk-related information: the SHOC Room of the WHO in Geneva; the field library project of the library of the UN/ISDR; and the activities of the two NGOs in Cameroon, WESDE and PROSENAT.

On the research institution side, the project was run by the University of Geneva (Yvan Leanza and André Wamba) and the ENAC faculty of the Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (Valérie November, Charlotte Cabasse, Katia de Conto and Basile Barbey). During the course of the project, Yvan Leanza was appointed a professor at Laval University in Quebec. He continued to contribute to the project from Canada, with the help of a research assistant, Ekaterina Smali. Other participants were John Horekens, as consultant for international organisations, and Mireille Lador, as webmaster.

The results and reflections that emerged from the project have been published in a variety of ways. Firstly on a website – [www.riskinsitu.info/home.html](http://www.riskinsitu.info/home.html) – and then later in a research report. A seminar held in Geneva on 5 November 2007, at which the content of this report was discussed by the members of the research team and representatives of the organisations involved. Following the seminar, a good practices guide was prepared and distributed. The final stage in the process is the publication of this book. Chapter 1 offers a new vision of the circulation of information in risk situations, and sets out the methodological framework used in the study of the three areas. Each of these areas is covered in detail in a separate chapter, starting with the WHO SHOC Room (Chap. 2), then crisis management in Madagascar (Chap. 3), and finally an analysis of the way information circulates during the activities carried out by the NGOs WESDE and PROSENAT in Yaoundé and Maroua (Chap. 4). We conclude in Chap. 5 with a synthesis of the discussions that took place at the seminar at which the results were presented and some theoretical considerations outlined in Chap. 1. It includes also the guidelines offered to risk management practitioners. While responsibility for the publication of this book lies with Valérie November and Yvan Leanza, other members of the research

team were involved in the drafting of certain chapters. Katia de Conto contributed to Chap. 2; Charlotte Cabasse and Basile Barbey to Chap. 3; Ekaterina Smali and André Wamba to Chap. 4; and John Horekens to the conclusion. In addition, Estelle Lépine, of the EPFL, kindly assisted with the rewriting and updating of Chaps. 2 and 3. Valérie November would like to thank Christophe Buffet for his attentive rereading of the chapter on Madagascar.

We would like to express our sincere thanks to all those mentioned above, without whom this complex and ambitious project would not have been possible. Special mention is due to the GIAN for their financial contribution, as well as to the School of Architecture, Civil and Environmental Engineering of the EPFL for their translation support during the research project. We would also like to thank Joanna MacDaniel for her translation of this book, Boris Calame for his help for the figures, François René de Cotret and Rhéa J. Rocque for their editorial help and the publishing team at Springer for their support and their patience.

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