



In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

## **Doctor of Philosophy**

**Katja Brundiers**

Will defend her prospectus

### **Disasters as Windows of Opportunity for Change Towards Sustainability**

#### **Abstract**

Slow progress towards proposed sets of sustainability outcomes is often attributed to institutional inertia, socio-technical path-dependencies, and vested interests in existing power structures. As a result, many organizations are now calling for radical change and are seeking transformative pathways to sustainability. In parallel, the notion of disasters as windows of opportunity for change, in particular change towards sustainability, has gained interest among scholarly, policy, and local groups from the fields of disaster research and practice. Disasters potentially represent a “reset-button” and can be leveraged for improved socio-economic equity and enhanced ecological integrity. Yet to date there has been little, if any, empirical exploration of the viability and nature of such transitions in disaster contexts.

In my research, I will investigate first how and why places, stricken by disaster, have engaged in a process of transformation to sustainability. My work focuses on the governance of such transformations and the implications for future disaster planning, management and recovery. First, I ask: Who are the various actors involved and how do they relate to each other? What goals does each actor group pursue, how, and what are the outcomes and for whom? Second, I will investigate to what extent key players in the disaster arena perceive opportunities to contribute to such transformational processes in the future, how, and why.

My research will consist of two case studies of disasters where I will collaborate with research participants in order to reconstruct and assess the processes and outcomes of proclaimed sustainability transformations, and reflect on their lessons learned in order to discuss potential recommendations for future endeavors in other places. The two case studies include Christchurch, New Zealand and Banda Aceh,

Indonesia. A third project includes interviews and focus groups with key players in disaster contexts beyond the two case studies—including multi-lateral donor organizations and international non-governmental organizations—exploring their interest and abilities in adding to their mission the support of local communities in such sustainability transformations.

My work will contribute to developing theory about sustainability transformations at the intersection of sustainable development and disaster risk management. I expect my work will support the practice of intended directional change in the context disasters by identifying what practices actors have pursued to implement change in specific contexts, what major barriers and success factors were, and how those practices might be generalized to inform change processes in disaster practice in diverse parts of the world.

Wednesday, April 30, 2014

12:00pm

WGHL, 481

Faculty, students, and the general public are invited

Supervisory Committee:

Dr. Hallie Eakin (chair)

Dr. Adenrele Awotona, member

Dr. Daniel Sarewitz, member