



In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

## **Doctor of Philosophy**

### **Katja Brundiers**

Will defend her dissertation

### **Disasters as Opportunities for Change Towards Sustainability**

#### **Abstract**

Scholars have highlighted the role of disturbance and crisis, including disasters, in enabling systemic change towards sustainability. However, there are relatively few empirical studies on how individuals and organizations are able to utilize disasters as opportunities for change towards sustainability. This dissertation addresses three questions applied to two case studies: First, what changes were pursued in the aftermath of disasters, and to what extent did these changes contribute to sustainability? Second, how were people (and their organizations) able to pursue change towards sustainability? Third, what can be learned about seeing and seizing opportunities for change towards sustainability in disaster contexts and about sustaining those introduced changes over time?

The research entailed the creation of a theoretical framework, synthesizing literature from disaster studies and sustainability transition studies, to enable cross-case comparison and the appraisal of sustainability outcomes (Study 1). The framework was applied to two empirical case studies of post-disaster recovery: the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami in Aceh, Indonesia (Study 2), and the 2010-2012 series of earthquakes in the greater Christchurch area, New Zealand (Study 3).

The research revealed no systemic change towards sustainability in either case, although change towards sustainability was pursued in various areas, such as housing, educating, caring, and engaging in governance. Opportunities for sustainability emerged at different points following the disaster; change processes are ongoing. The sustainability changes were supported by "Sustainability Change Agents" (SCAs): people who were able to see and seize opportunities for change towards sustainability in the midst of disaster. SCAs were characterized as individuals with various attributes, starting with an ability to perceive opportunities, catalyze others to support this risk-taking endeavor, and stay in the endurance race. The study

concludes with some recommendations for interventions to inform pre-disaster sustainability planning. These avenues include a toolbox and a curricular approach that would educate and enable students as future professionals to see and seize opportunities for change towards sustainability in disaster contexts (Study 4).

Thursday, October 27, 2016  
9:30 a.m. to 10:30 a.m.  
WGHL, 481

Faculty, students, and the general public are invited.

Supervisory Committee:  
Dr. Hallie Eakin, Chair  
Dr. Daniel Sarewitz, member  
Dr. Adenrele Awotona, member