

Popular Scientific Summary – Master Thesis

LTH, DRMCCA, 2022: Momo Paula Lühmann

Igniting Risk Communication?

Organizational factors for forest fire risk communication in Canton Bern, Switzerland

In the light of climate change, forest fire preparedness becomes more important. Risk communication could help with this preparedness. But what factors of the communicator are necessary to communicate this increasing risk effectively?

Imagine you are walking down a pedestrian street on a summer day. The street is full of people running errands and enjoying the sun. Suddenly, the person in front of you is bumped by a pickpocket who pilfers their purse. It all happens extremely quickly; you are unable to react. You find yourself turning, only to catch a glimpse of the thief disappearing around the corner. Completely shocked, you turn back to the victim.

Perhaps you have seen situations like this on TV before, or read about them in a book, yet you were completely paralyzed when it happened right in front of you. Why is that? Why did you not make yourself heard, grab the thief or sprint after them? The answer may be that you just had not been exposed to such a situation in real life before. A similar dilemma applies to the population of Canton Bern in Switzerland in relation to forest fires. Forest fires in Canton Bern are rare; hence the local population has low exposure to such a hazard and correspondingly minimal knowledge and experience. Due to climate change, forest fire risk in the region is expected to increase. Consequently, risk communication to mitigate forest fires is of growing importance.

Most often, risk communication is analyzed with a focus on either the content and form of risk communication or its recipients. Little attention is given to the communicators' perspective. This thesis investigates what organizational factors are needed for successful risk communication. It compares findings of scientific literature for risk communication with those deemed necessary by practitioners. The main results show a strong similarity in the importance of inter- and intra-organizational factors and reveal a significant difference in the presence of a risk communication strategy and the direct involvement of target groups in the risk communication. The results imply that although the findings in the scientific literature paint a perfect picture of organizational factors necessary for risk communication, not all of them are easily applicable in practice. Some of this is due to the different cultural and geographical contexts of the scientific literature versus practice. Overall, this thesis would like to encourage more research in the field of risk communication, especially in the European forest fire context. Let's ignite risk communication and to keep forests from being ablaze.