



Webinar Series -Lecture 3

In celebration of 15 years of Service



Topic: Social and spatial escalation of risks

by Professor Alexander Fekete, TH Köln – University of Applied Sciences

Professor Alexander Fekete is Professor of Risk and Crisis Management at TH Köln – University of Applied Sciences since December 2012. Professor Fekete holds a diploma degree in Geography from University of Würzburg, a doctorate from the University of Bonn and a Habilitation from University of Würzburg. Prof. Fekete has extensive knowledge having worked as Project Officer at the German Federal Office of Civil Protection (2009-2012) and Research Scholar (2005-2009) at the United Nations University – Institute for Environment and Human Security (UNU-EHS), conducting research on social vulnerability to floods and climate change adaptation. Professor Fekete has also functioned as consultant at the World Health Organization (WHO), the German Technical Cooperation (GTZ), and the German Committee for Disaster Reduction (DKKV). He has carried out fieldwork and workshops in many countries around the world including Armenia, Iran, Japan, Sri Lanka and Switzerland.

Areas of expertise :

- Interdisciplinary disaster risk management
- Risk governance
- Urban resilience
- Risk and crisis communication

11th June 2021**12.30-1.30 p.m.(SL time)**

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Abstract

Recent experience with the COVID-19 pandemic as well as other rather slow-onset hazards or processes such as climate change have underlined the difficulties in human adjustment to long-term risks. The respective hazards, the risks associated with them and their unfolding impacts are challenges by themselves already. However, additional effects occur which can aggravate or amplify one specific hazard to become an escalating event. For example, social unrest and political conflicts related to public health measures such as lockdowns or other pre- or restrictions. There are a number of names for such phenomena currently debated anew amongst researchers mainly; cascading effects, compound events, concurrent hazards etc. Practitioners in emergency services or operational disaster management have long been skeptical about adding another unlikely secondary hazard to an already unlikely risk scenario. But disaster science as well as practice is driven by risk speculations but often only emerges on a wider scale after respective events have occurred.

Creeping risks therefore pose a specific challenge of long-term dynamics which enable the development of social reactions and feedback discussions. While this is a task for a holistic risk and crisis communication process, it also points towards the need to understand escalation breakpoints and their possible detrimental effects on handling the original hazard triggers. While there is some research on cascading effects within hazard-chains, and research on such effects within critical infrastructure, and research within the social sciences on social amplifications of risk, they often are not interconnected. More interdisciplinary concepts are necessary as well as empirical research. Another field are spatial escalations of risk, when one hazard event in one area influences other areas around it or in other regions of the world. An example is the March 11 2011 Tsunami in Japan that caused ripple effects especially by its secondary or rather, tertiary hazard after the triggering earthquake by the impacts on the nuclear power plant. Germany decided to take this as a tipping point to finally phase out of nuclear energy production. Other examples of spatial escalations of risk can be observed at national borders where human decisions have led to very differential growth of built-up areas as well as social vulnerabilities as well as urban growth into hazard zones.