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Understanding disaster risk management as an everyday concept and practice in municipal government policy, planning and management: learning from the experience of Santa Fe, Argentina, with urban flood risk

This research aims to enhance our understanding of the conditions that can enable and sustain urban disaster risk management processes from the perspective of local governments as the leading actors at the city scale. It explores how local governments are incorporating the concept of disaster risk management (DRM) into their everyday work and translating it into specific practices.

Addressing DRM as an emerging and cross-cutting policy for municipal governments in medium-sized cities in low- and middle-income countries, a theoretical approach is proposed which builds upon the combination of two strands of literature: institutional theory and policy innovation theory. With these interdisciplinary insights in mind, an organisational and process-based framework to analyse the institutionalisation of DRM in municipal governments is developed. The framework considers emergence, embeddedness and sustained change as the organisational phases of institutionalisation which unfold in tandem with early adopter, role model and pedagogy for change inter-organisational phases.

An abductive logic of enquiry combined with an embedded single-case study underpins the research design. The city of Santa Fe, the first municipality in Argentina in developing and implementing an urban DRM policy, is analysed over 2007-2017. Primary data was generated during an eleven-month fieldwork, including participatory observations at two departments in the municipal government, 58 interviews with representatives from municipal, provincial and national governments, 18 interviews with participants from other key urban actors, facilitation of a focus group with municipal authorities and attendance to multi-stakeholder workshops.

The process approach of institutionalisation phases might offer an alternative to the traditional before, during and after event rationale of DRM, while the organisational approach might provide a complementary perspective to sectoral approximations and overarching disaster risk governance frameworks.