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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/rga/8930>

DOI: 10.4000/rga.8930

ISSN: 1760-7426

This article is a translation of:

Communiquer sur les risques naturels en montagne : des effets de croyance aux divergences sociales
- URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/rga/8913> [fr]

Publisher:

Association pour la diffusion de la recherche alpine, UGA Éditions/Université Grenoble Alpes

Electronic reference

Mikaël Chambru and Jean-Philippe De Oliverira, "The Communication Around Natural Risks in Mountain Regions: Analyzing the Effects of Belief and Social Differences", *Journal of Alpine Research | Revue de géographie alpine* [Online], 109-2 | 2021, Online since 09 September 2021, connection on 08 December 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/rga/8930> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/rga.8930>

This text was automatically generated on 8 December 2022.

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The Communication Around Natural Risks in Mountain Regions: Analyzing the Effects of Belief and Social Differences

Mikaël Chambru and Jean-Philippe De Oliverira

Addressing Natural Risks in Mountain Regions: Analyzing the Impact of Belief Bias and Social Differences

- 1 Unlike other disciplines in the field of Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS), ICS has paid little attention to the mountain as an object, and field, of research. However, communication and communicational phenomena have long been developed in mountain regions around social interests, tools, mechanisms, practices, actors' games and strategies, and power relations or conflicts. While they have been ignored or little studied by ICS, they have not been left out of the dynamics of the production of knowledge and scientific expertise. Other HSS disciplines, especially Geography, have long analyzed communication in mountain regions. Generally, the studies undertaken have focused on communication tools as vectors of information, awareness raising, education, and empowerment, and of the adaptation of practices and regions in the face of environmental and natural hazards (Lolive & Okamura, 2017). They have focused communication around the issue of "preventive information", itself understood as a pillar that public policies use for risk prevention, in an attempt to measure how this communication influences the public, and then to improve its impact in order to increase awareness of multi-risk situations in Alpine environments. Against this background, communication on natural hazards in the mountain region may be understood as a fairly "classic" persuasive form of communication, aimed at building consensus and bringing about behavior change (Dacheux, 1996). This functionalist

concept of communication tends to overestimate the effects of communication approaches and to reduce communication to the dissemination of information whose effectiveness must be evaluated in order to reach a wider public (De Oliveira, 2020). On the contrary, ICS views communication as a process and as a complex social phenomenon, revealing social interests that go beyond it, and which have multiple dimensions (political, cultural, economic or technological) that unfold at different levels (both individual and societal) and in an asymmetric manner (in terms of space, time, situation and technique). In other words, this communication approach to communication processes does not reduce communication merely to tools and their potential social effects (Olivesi, 2013).

- 2 This article draws on this approach in order to analyze communication on natural hazards in mountain regions ¹. Its objective is to understand the social, political and scientific issues in a context haunted by the imperative for ecological transition in Alpine regions. This analysis is based on an interdisciplinary “action-research” (Geography and ICS) between four research laboratories from three French universities ². Funding was provided by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) via the interregional operational program “Massif des Alpes” (IPA). Two mountain regions, one located in the Hautes-Alpes region and the other in the Haute-Savoie region ³, were analyzed over a period of three years ⁴. This action-research seeks to produce scientific expertise capable of supporting policies in mountain areas. Its objective is to deliver functional tools to implement or improve prevention mechanisms and to raise public awareness (among residents and tourists) of natural hazards in mountain regions in order to promote behavior change. This operational objective therefore perceives communication as a technical mechanism endowed with performative effects that ensure the consistency, even standardization, of individuals’ practices. However, this discourse on communication produces a reality effect: the rooting of the belief in the “omnipotence” of communication with regard to its capacity to transform the social world for the “common good”, even though communication helps to structure power relations and the functioning of contemporary public space (Neveu and Rieffel, 1991). Naturally, this operational objective conflicts with our scientific approach which views the challenges of communication as numerous power issues “in the making”. It offers, however, an *in situ* observatory to analyze the shared meaning of communication that researchers in HSS use with regard to “preventive information”. It is for this reason that we chose to engage in an action-research project despite our epistemic reluctance which we explicitly stated to our partners right from the moment of responding to the call for projects. We thus adopted a double posture, pragmatically associating a functionalist approach to communication (for the operational dimension) with a critical approach in ICS (for the scientific dimension). The decision to “hold on to” these two apparently contradictory approaches is hardly new ⁵. Rather, its originality lies in the fact that this action-research project offers an opportunity to gain insight both into mountain regions and into a reflexive empirical object, making it possible to analyze the communication on natural hazards in mountain regions based on the policies developed around these risks and involving researchers in the production of scientific expertise with a social and political aim.
- 3 From this perspective, the mountain is a new field (yet to be analyzed) that allows us to identify contemporary changes in public communication around social issues, notably through the mobilization of information and communication techniques aimed at

encouraging behavioral changes among individuals in the field of the environment in “at-risk” areas. The mountain environment has been presented as a region that is particularly subject to natural hazards (Naaïm-Bouvet and Richard, 2015), the vulnerability of which has increased because of the effects of current climate change (Einhorn *et al.* 2015). In response, public action must develop “a local risk culture” and improve “preventive information” around these risks, and communication is perceived as one of the main vectors of resilience (Ouarab-Bouaouli, 2008). This leads to, and legitimizes, the use of public communication and the mobilization of information communication systems as a means of changing the behavior of individuals. Our analysis, then, revolves around the following question: how does the implementation, in mountain regions, of policies relating to communication around “preventive information” on natural hazards reveal social divergences? The analysis is structured around two sets of results from our field research. The first set shows a discrepancy between the public authorities who believe that natural hazards are problems that need to be addressed, and the inhabitants who do not have a shared view of these situations as problematic or as requiring public intervention that reinforces “preventive information”. The second shows that this discrepancy may be explained in part by the fact that a communication policy revolving around “preventive information” allows the consensual and plural enrolment of a “biopower” logic into the public action undertaken within mountain regions.

Natural Hazards in Mountain Regions: A Problem Without an Audience?

- 4 The aim of the IPA call for projects was “to highlight the scientific partnership projects jointly constructed with local actors to develop innovative tools for the integrated management of natural hazards and the adaptation to climate change”. The interdisciplinary action-research on which this article is based falls within this context, specifically in the line of research “Science-Decision-Action for the prevention of natural hazards in the Alps”. The call for projects underscored the need for renewed public action around risk management, defined from an institutional perspective and based on precise and modeled technical-scientific knowledge. These risks in mountain regions are both a natural phenomenon and a social product structured by a regulatory and legislative framework as part of the public action taken in these regions (Favier, 2002). Natural hazards are thus an integral part of the social, economic and political dynamics of mountain societies. From the 13th century, i.e., from the first regulations issued by political authorities, a new equilibrium was installed in these “at risk” regions between administrative authorities and residents. This equilibrium then evolved over the centuries, based on the changes in state action and on the reorganization of the mountain environment. There was, however, a relatively stable set-up marked by tension between the socio-economic uses of the mountain, the safety of village communities, and the general interest defined by the state (Decrop, 1998). From the end of the 20th century, there was a change in the field of hazards in mountain regions. Indeed, policies on risk management progressively began to focus primarily on the distribution of “preventive information”, mobilized as a tool to reduce vulnerability and as a tool whose objective was to modify public behavior (Peltier, 2005). Two of the action-research lines of research discussed here are specifically

concerned with this issue which is related to the construction of alternative protocols and the potential use of digital social networks to produce “better” preventive information on potential hazards and to increase the resilience of the regions in question. The underlying assumption in this approach is that there is a need to compensate for the public’s potential loss of empirical knowledge by sharing scientific information with a wide audience via mechanisms perceived as “innovative” by the academic and regional partners.

- 5 However, the tension between vernacular knowledge and techno-scientific knowledge on natural hazards does not stand up to a critical analysis of mountain history, as these risks have been developed in a collective, plural and conflictual manner that goes beyond a parameterizable hazard (Favier & Granet-Abisset, 2000). This was confirmed by the field survey undertaken in Pra Chiriou and Villard d’Aulp between 2018 and 2020. First, the natural hazards in these two regions were clearly recognized and identified by both the inhabitants and those residents with holiday homes: there was no “denial of reality” phenomenon, nor ignorance of the observable dangers. For instance, all the respondents were able to identify accurately one of the major risks (avalanches, landslides, torrential lava) affecting the region, including when the municipality neither had, nor had published, regulatory documentation on risk prevention and “preventive information”. Second, residents did not perceive risk prevention as a problem requiring special attention from local elected officials or the establishment of communication mechanisms other than those already in place:

“We mustn’t exaggerate, of course, there’s nothing like zero risk. State services tend to exaggerate natural hazards” (EPC);

“I don’t feel like I’m living in a risky environment. If you listen to the regulations, the entire village is in the red zone, therefore at risk: that doesn’t make any sense.” (EVC)

- 6 There thus emerge three positions relating to the natural hazards to which the public are potentially exposed. Without minimizing it, the first position defines risk as a constituent element of the mountain environment, and one that is inherent to it. As a result, it perceives it as an ordinary risk whose threat is visible, with recurring hazards and uncertain consequences:

“That’s nature, it has been in existence since the beginning so we know that we risk flooding, ravines, stone avalanches.” (EPC);

“Here we live with it [...] we live there or we don’t, taking on a risk is simply a part of life.” (EVA);

“It remains a natural and wild environment and we cannot control everything.” (idem);

“We have lived with risks ever since we were little, we are used to these things, we respect the mountains.” (EVA).

- 7 The second position highlights the expertise of the public in the face of these risks, through their knowledge of the region and the routine practices they adopt as part of their local culture of risk:

“I don’t really see what information we can be given because we know the subject” (EPC);

“I somewhat follow mountain common sense” (idem);

“Well, yes, you need at least some knowledge of the mountains” (EVA).

- 8 The third position, which is linked to the first two, highlights the overemphasis on risk management in the region:

“Risks, risks... they’ll soon put them everywhere... Soon, even leaving your home, that will be considered a risk” (EPC);

“It’s annoying because we are in a society where we’ll soon be unable to do anything, we see risks everywhere!” (EPC);

“It’s a bit too much, we are now in a culture where we are afraid of everything. We must protect ourselves from all risks, it’s not sustainable” (EVA).

- 9 In the mountain areas analyzed, the residents neither expressed a need for more preventive information related to natural hazards, nor did they propose specific additional measures. Some even found risk information an annoying issue, such as the resident who sighed when given information and responded: “But I don’t care!” (EPC). The regions therefore felt that this need formulated *a priori* by the institutions did not concern them: local residents in Pra Chiriou and Villard d’Aulp considered natural hazards as a non-issue. Its territorialized objectification was thus misaligned with that of the national and supra-national framework incorporated into the action-research project. The framework itself justifies the need for continued public action since the 19th century, because the challenges encountered intertwine with others and simultaneously give rise to conflicts between central government and local authorities around the solutions to be provided to situations identified as problematic. There thus emerges a rather classic process in French policies concerning mountain regions (Ollivier-Yaniv, 2013). This process associates a regulatory apparatus that combines the law, regulations and the management of the bureaucracy that allows sanctions in the event of non-compliance with the “legal umbrella” deployed by the State to protect itself from any liability in the event of an accident. Preventive information, therefore, makes it possible to justify, both before and after events, the need for this regulatory action by explaining the dangers for people residing in mountain regions. Recent developments in the French regulatory system around natural hazards, focused on a logic of increased individual responsibility in a context where the system of actors of “preventive information” is becoming more complex, is in reality based on the following triptych: “to inform is to prevent risks”; “to inform is to shape ‘responsible behavior’”; “to inform is to protect” (Becerra and Peltier, 2011). In other words, the constraint of communicating around natural hazards for local elected officials is therefore – according to the results of our field survey – more exogenous than endogenous to the territory in which they develop their political action. However, within the framework of this action-research, these local elected officials chose to engage in this dynamic, driven by European institutions around natural hazards, rather than to help to publicize the socio-economic risks with which the inhabitants of the two areas were more concerned. Indeed, the municipal teams in place submitted an expression of interest for this research (an essential element required for a call-for-projects proposal to be considered as complete), notably to benefit from the strategic recommendations relating to communication associated with “preventive information”. How, then, can one explain this?

Preventive information”: a logic of “biopower”?

- 10 The gap, which was clearly revealed during this action-research project, may at first glance appear paradoxical, even contradictory, if communication is not considered as an element that reveals social interests which go beyond it, and which have multiple dimensions that unfold across different spatio-temporal scales in an asymmetrical

manner. This communication approach, associated with an analysis that involves listening to what people think, say and experience (Chambru and De Oliveira, 2021), allowed us to document the assumption that a communication policy based on “preventive information” allows the consensual and plural inclusion of a logic of “biopower” in public action within mountain regions, and therefore to explain in part why this is not necessarily paradoxical. Indeed, our field study revealed a public issue that is, *a priori*, rendered invisible by the institutional framework of action-research around natural hazards. When asked about these risks, all the respondents systematically and spontaneously spoke of the social and economic risks brought about by the climate problem in mountain regions and its impact on the regional development model that revolves around winter tourist attractions. They also unanimously considered that these socio-economic risks were more important than natural hazards in terms of the urgent need to address them:

“If there is less snow and the station has to close, everyone will leave, it will be a second exodus” (EPC);

“The problem is that there are no jobs all year round! If young people come to settle here, what will they do?” (EPC);

“The real risk is that the school will close: there has been no birth over the last three years in the village” (EPC);

“If the school closes, families will not come to settle here, then there will be no more businesses and we will become a village of retirees or those with holiday homes” (EPC).

- 11 The socio-economic concerns expressed by the inhabitants of the territory are therefore clearly at odds with the need for preventive information on natural hazards set *a priori* by national and supra-national institutions. Rather than develop “preventive information” relating to pre-defined risks, the challenge regions face therefore concerns jointly defining these risks, i.e., defining them and problematizing them to propose appropriate solutions.
- 12 Establishing ties between risk management and democratic processes makes it possible to express social differences concerning the future of the territories in question, to reconsider the legitimacy of the institutional solutions proposed thus far, and ultimately to politicize the associated issues and uncertainties. However, the elected representatives of Pra Chiriou and Villard d'Aulp consider that these issues and uncertainties are incompatible with the maintenance of the region's socio-economic development model (on which their political action is focused) because opening up debate on the said issues may bring about dissent and conflict that could weaken the equilibrium established between those who rely primarily on ski tourism and those who would like to promote other activities. Therefore, publicly committing to the issue of natural hazards is hardly risky at the local level, especially since in France, unlike in other countries, “preventive information” does not seek to involve the people in policymaking processes (Peltier, 2005). On the contrary, “preventive information” around natural hazards falls within risk-prevention policies which, as a category of public action, focus on the social issues that allow the political authorities to justify their commitment and their action for security reasons, perceived as a consubstantial “regulatory principle” of the state (Ollivier-Yaniv, 2013). This “asocial” interpretation of natural hazards means that the solutions envisaged are based on prescriptive requirements presented to the public as indisputable because they are “a matter of course” and are implemented in the interest of the general good: protecting mountain populations from specific geographical features in their environment which may pose a

threat (avalanches, debris flows, landslides, etc.) to avoid material and human damage, even if this need for safety is not expressed by the people who reside there. From this perspective, the management of natural hazards in mountain regions reflects the changes in the forms of government in contemporary “Western” societies, marked by the development of the “biopolitics” of power (Foucault, 1976, 2004): while public authorities participate in the social field at different levels in order to broaden their scope of intervention on issues that appear as non-partisan and non-conflictual relating to individual behavior, they have withdrawn from the regulation of economic activities because of the neoliberal doctrine.

- 13 In these forms of government, communication allows public authorities to limit their coercive intervention by mobilizing persuasive instruments and mechanisms (Ollivier-Yaniv, 2013). Thus, communicating about natural hazards in mountain regions is not simply an attempt to help to change peoples’ behavior and help them to address environmental threats more easily. Rather, and above all, engaging in “preventive information” involves more political and invisible issues, which explains in part the commitment of the municipal staff of Pra Chiriou and Villard d’Aulp. First, it is a matter of ensuring that the actions taken are in line with the region’s objectives in accordance with the legal obligations (for instance, prevention tools such as municipal information documents on major risks) that bind local authorities. For instance, the elected officials of Villard d’Aulp said that they felt “obligated” to provide “preventive information”, even if this was not among the inhabitants’ demands. In this regard, the elected officials “reproached” the state for delegating to them powers and responsibilities relating to risks, against a background of ever-increasing budgetary restrictions (with reduced allocations meaning that these officials were forced to arbitrate where expenses were concerned). Second, it provides a means through which local elected officials can strengthen their political capital, not with their constituents (who expect nothing in terms of this type of action), but with the different political levels (multiple communities (*communauté de communes*), prefecture, department, region, etc.). This aspect was very clear in Villard d’Aulp: the mayor was involved in issues related to the environment and risks because this gave him visibility and credit at the local and national level (the visit of the Minister of Ecology, Ségolène Royal, during his mandate, testified to this). In Pra Chiriou, the mayor became accustomed to this preventive dimension through a professional career within public and political institutions (regional natural park, general council, town hall) and then during various elective mandates. Put differently, local elected officials found themselves “playing the game” (Desage & Guéranger, 2011) to address a constraint outside their environment because they were forced to meet the requirements of a territorialized public action. Rather than focus on the specific concept of risk underlying and guiding this prevention policy, discussions focused on the “information” tools associated with natural hazard prevention, despite the fact that the call for projects required that, when making recommendations to elected officials, the methodological protocol should include the mechanisms that involve all residents. There thus appears to be a spatial shift in public action between, on the one hand, a national and supranational level – based on a logic of participation – in order to “manufacture” consensus artificially and thus legitimize its decisions and, on the other, the local level that considers it worthwhile to develop “preventive information” actions vis-à-vis the higher territorial levels, but without gaining “political capital” from its citizens.

Conclusion

- 14 Mountain regions, and the public action around the natural hazards there, allow us to analyze how communication is associated with a section of the state's regional actions. Natural hazards appear as a "regulated biopolitical object" (Schiffino, 2011), itself shaped over the long term by the social construction of this public problem, the non-mobilization of the people and of social actors in this process, and the strong institutional sensitivity to the problem. Consequently, public communication is once again mobilized and legitimized, supposedly in the interest of the general good, via games played at the spatial and temporal levels. However, unlike areas "at risk" technologically (Suraud, 2014), it does not translate into the implementation of spaces for significant public debate around hazards within Alpine areas, even though risks in mountain regions have historically been constructed "through reciprocal exchanges of knowledge, by successively taking ownership of this knowledge and know-how – a collective development, plural rather than consensual, of risk (...) and not simply [by the construction] of information on a risk that already exists, that is already a given" (Decrop, 1998). *Ultimately*, in the scientific analysis related to this action-research project, this amounts to making conclusions invalidating the institutional demands in terms of a deliverable operational framework: the central role given to communication and information around the prevention of "natural hazards" thus paradoxically contributes to discrediting and rendering invisible the preventive action – which is necessary and legitimate – within mountain regions. This centrality also refers to the increased monitoring of individual behavior by institutions and political actors, which inhabitants questioned: our study showed that these inhabitants were in favor of an approach to risk management that involved a collective dynamic with regard to the implementation of an integrated policy concerning the future of Alpine regions. The creation of the communication dimension of a prevention policy may thus provide an ideal opportunity to involve inhabitants in the construction of these socio-political issues, i.e., to shift the initial question to all the risks – natural and socio-economic – which these inhabitants consider that they face. This means that the tension and strategies involving inhabitants, public authorities and scientists around these issues should be made more visible, notably by stating and revisiting the ethical and epistemological issues that this raises for scientists in this actors' game.
- 15 Several questions, which may be seen as multiple avenues that could open up interdisciplinary dialogue, emerge for researchers in the HSS field. If raising awareness of the risks in mountain regions is neither a priority, nor even perceived as necessary by mountain populations, why is there a need to participate in the construction of a preventive information policy in these areas which, "in any case", must meet the requirement of external injunctions? Similarly, why participate in the legitimization of the social norm of foresight by seeking to make people "participate" in a question in which they feel that they are the best placed to provide their own answers? Is this a means through which researchers may respond, above all, to a moral imperative (to reflect on the resilience of mountain regions and its challenges over the long term and at different spatial scales) to which they attach great importance? How can mountain inhabitants be responsive to communication mechanisms from external actors seeking to sensitize them about Alpine risks, when they consider themselves to be better acquainted with these risks than those who reflect about them, even when these

mechanisms are based on a rigorous empirical analysis? Does producing this type of analysis commissioned by public institutions, including when action-research approaches are used, help to dispossess these people of their regions and the problems they face? Is it, therefore, relevant for researchers wishing to produce critical knowledge to participate in this type of research program in HSS, which ultimately falls within a “biopolitical” logic of public action?

- 16 These three years of action-research underscore that reflexivity and the critical dimension must be active throughout the project in order to maintain permanently a double posture between a functionalist approach to communication (for the operational dimension) and a critical approach to ICS (for the scientific dimension). Indeed, this posture is regularly challenged because of the dynamics of analysis of researchers – and interdisciplinary collaborations – who consider communication in its instrumental dimension alone. This is why an interdisciplinarity focused on ICS is important when it comes to analyzing communication and communicational phenomena unfolding in mountain regions (Chambru & De Oliveira, 2021), in particular through the prism of “preventive information” around natural hazards. This is all the more important now that, on both the scientific and political agenda, the integration of natural hazards into the issue of the ecological transition of mountain regions is emerging, and is itself part of a double antagonistic socio-political and cultural frame of reference: on the one hand, it seeks alternatives to the model of economic growth and dependence on fossil fuels; on the other, it involves managerial public policies resulting from an integration of this criticism (Chambru and Claeys, 2021). In this context, participating in the production of scientific expertise aimed at creating information communication systems with public institutions (irrespective of whether these systems concern “information”, “prevention”, “participation” or “deliberation”), justified by this ambivalent injunction to the transition of Alpine regions, is relevant from both an epistemic and epistemological view, and in terms of research ethics and the social responsibility of the HSS field.

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NOTES

1. This article will not address the risks associated with human activity, such as the technological risks around Installations Classified for the Protection of the Environment (ICPE) or hydraulic dams, even though many of these sites may be found in mountain regions.
2. Three teams specialized in the field of Geography, from the Universities of Avignon, Grenoble Alpes, and Lyon 2 and our team specialized in ICS (also from the University of Grenoble Alpes).
3. The names of the towns in which the study was undertaken have been deliberately omitted for reasons of anonymity and confidentiality, which was requested by respondents before they agreed to an interview. They have also been omitted to reduce tension within these regions, in view of the emphasis placed on individual cases and public institutions. (For these reasons, these towns will be referred to under the fictitious names of Pra Chiriou and Villard d'Aulp.
4. In each of the regions, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with elected officials and socio-economic actors. In addition, 20 and 30 structured interviews were held (respectively in Pra Chiriou and Villard d'Aulp, abbreviated as EPC and EVA) with inhabitants far removed from socio-professional roles focused on risk management and prevention. Direct observations were also undertaken during regular field trips and inhabitants were asked to fill in a questionnaire. Part of this investigative work was carried out with the support of Marianne Chabert, Rosalie Régny and Monica Elkhoury during their internship as part of the requirements of the Master's program proposed by the GRESEC laboratory.
5. This research situation, which involves a social demand from which one must distance oneself in order to construct the object of study, is not new in ICS because its improvement and institutionalization as a scientific discipline is historically linked to the field of expertise (Galibert, 2016). Indeed, in the field of the sociology of risks and the environment in the public procurement context, one may observe how actors in the political field are now taking ownership of the scientific knowledge produced through an instituted procedural model of expertise (Granjou, 2003).

ABSTRACTS

This article analyzes communication concerning natural hazards in mountain regions. It draws on the actual policies of “preventive information” that involve researchers in the production of scientific expertise with a social and political aim. Communication is analyzed here through the prism of Information and Communication Sciences (ICS), rather than as a phenomenon of the dissemination of information requiring improvement. This study is based on an interdisciplinary “action-research” program (Geography and ICS) carried out in the Hautes-Alpes and Haute-Savoie regions over a period of three years. This article acts as an empirical and reflective object and provides a point of entry into the mountain terrain. The article analyzes contemporary changes in public communication aimed at changing individuals' behavior relating to the environment in “at-risk” regions. Drawing on this experience, and on a critical approach in ICS,

we seek to propose interdisciplinary dialogue on the dynamics of research and the production of knowledge about mountain regions.

INDEX

Keywords: natural hazards, communication, preventive information, public policy, environment

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