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Local cultural perceptions of climate change and sea level rise in coastal cities in Germany

Based on findings of the research project, “How societies deal with climate change?”, the contribution aims at pointing out by the example of two cities on the Baltic Sea coast how, there, local perceptions of climate-related vulnerabilities and resiliencies are tied to a specific local cultural knowledge and how the local perceptions significantly differ from each other. It is important to underline that the differing perceptions cannot be explained by different natural conditions or physical risk situations. On the contrary, the cities share similar physical-material conditions and they have to face similar scenarios assessed by natural scientists with regard to climate-related developments (including the sea level rise). It will be shown that in Lübeck challenges of storm surges, flooding, and the vulnerability of the old city are recurrent topics in the local discourse. At the same time, however, Lübeck is portrayed as a city that has always defied the biggest challenges in its long Hanseatic history and that is traditionally well-equipped to cope with the climate change-induced threats to come. In Rostock, such a mode of interpretation does not play any role in the perception of climate change. Rather, in the East German city climate change is seen as an opportunity. Long periods of warmth might help to make the region more attractive to tourists which will have a positive effect on the job market and will make the city resilient compared to its precarious economic situation. It need not be emphasised that these differences both in the perceptions and the resilience strategies have consequences for governance processes and for a joint strategic planning in the region. Against this background, it will be argued that the conception of the terms “vulnerability” and “resilience”, which has been strongly influenced by the (human) ecology and natural hazards research, is to be enriched by the idea of the social and cultural construction of reality. The author will present an elaborated conceptualization of the terms and points out how it can be fruitfully harnessed for the analysis of cultural dimensions in coping with potential climate change impacts. Furthermore she will discuss implications for governance processes in coastal zones.

Biography

Gabriela Christmann is a sociologist. She has completed her PhD in 1996 from the University of Constance and her Postdoctoral studies (which is in German called “habilitation”) in 2003 from the Technical University of Dresden. She is Head of Research Department “Dynamics of communication, knowledge and spatial development” at Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space (IRS) in Erkner (near Berlin), Germany. At the same time, she is Vice Director at IRS and Professor for Sociology at the Technical University Berlin. He has published more than 15 papers in reputed journals.

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