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Institutionalizing an Epistemic Community: Disaster Studies in the Inter-war Period

Despite its limited practical impact in disaster relief and humanitarian coordination due to underfunding and political obstacles, the International Relief Union (IRU), founded 1927, made a significant contribution to knowledge building and transfer through its research work on what would nowadays be called “disaster prevention.” The IRU promoted this work through a journal entitled *Matériaux pour l'étude des calamités*. In order to find qualified contributors for this journal, national study commissions were established in several countries. An international conference was held in Paris in 1937 and an office for scientific cooperation was established to coordinate more permanently the work of this new expert network. It could build on the pre-existing links of scientists, in particular geographers and savant societies. Although intended to be global (because with links to the League of Nations and the Red Cross), the network had primarily European members, especially from France, Italy and Switzerland.

Based on the analysis of primary sources from ICRC, LRCS and LoN archives, this contribution aims at exploring several questions with regard to this early epistemic community of disaster experts. What structure did this community have? From which national environments did these experts come and what ideas did they bring with them? What values did these experts share to become part of a transnational community? Did this community shape the way in which disaster was perceived and reacted upon by politicians, state administrations and emergency relief workers? In other words, to what extent did they manage to make an authoritative claim to policy relevant knowledge and consequently the governance of natural disaster? Given that the European public of the 1930s was rather preoccupied with war than with natural disaster, the network's ideas might not have had immediate impact. It is therefore also important to see the legacy of this network and the continuities between this first attempt at disaster relief research and later institutional developments, such as the creation of the UN Disaster Relief Coordinator UNDRO in 1972 or the UNESCO Disaster preparedness and Mitigation Unit, which inherited parts of the IRU's scientific studies in 1967.

This paper is part of my ongoing PhD research.

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