

# ***International organizations and development in the age of the “risk society” paradigm (1970s-1980s): IAEA and UNIDO***

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This project aims at understanding to what extent and in what manner development and progress-oriented international organizations have taken into consideration in their agendas and activities the idea of a transformation of the relationship of humans with science, technological progress, and risk in the 1970s and 1980s. Focusing in particular on the example of the UN Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the project investigates two dimensions: one deals with social science ideas about “risk” and “risk society,” as well as with the changing societal perception of disaster risk in the 1970s and 1980s more generally. This dimension relates to the question of whether the emergence of these ideas in the social sciences and of a new discourse and sensibility had any impact on the agenda setting of international organizations. The other dimension is concerned with the underlying reality of “risk society” in the form of actual disasters and international organizations’ ad-hoc and long-term coping strategies to deal with them. A number of industrial and technological disasters served society and intellectuals as examples of the fact that human society has fallen victim to its technological progress. Exemplary were the nuclear accident of Three Mile Island of 1979 in the United States, the explosion of the pesticide factory of Carbide Union in Bhopal, India, of 1984 and the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster. These three disasters will be used as case studies to analyse the perceptions of technological disaster within UNIDO and IAEA, as well as the reactions and policy-changes that have (and have not) followed.

Through research in the archives of, notably, the two international organisations in question, as well as interviews with former staff, the project aims at identifying the ways in which, since the 1970s, contemporary practices and concepts about risk prevention, precaution, and sustainability emerged in and circulated through international organisations. The project thus furthers our understanding of how international organisations, geared towards technological progress and modernization, have redefined their missions in the face of an increasing consciousness of and discourse about risks related to industrial and technological disaster. In order to do this, the project combines recent scholarship on the socio-history of international organisations with recent critical research on risk society and disaster, and investigates to what extent ideas about risk and its management have circulated through international organisations.

The project touches on several nascent fields of research, such as the historiographies of risk and disaster, of international development, and of international organisations. None, however, have yet included research on international organisations and disaster in the 1970s and 1980s more broadly nor on the policies of UNIDO and IAEA with regard to disaster specifically. The project thus attempts to close an evident research gap.