



Beyond Storm Surge Xynthia: Peculiarities of French spatial planning and disaster management

P. Pigeon

Département de Géographie, Université de Savoie, France (Patrick.Pigeon@univ-savoie.fr)

Storm surge Xynthia, crossing Western Europe on 26–28 February, 2010, is considered a major disaster in France. With 52 fatalities and at least six more people to be missing, most of the deaths occurred in France when the powerful storm surge topped by battering waves up to 7.5 meter high. Yet, flood risk was not unknown in France. Numerous studies, some of them dating back to 2008, and risk prevention plans (PPR) stressed on it before municipalities experienced this disaster. They consider dike management both a major and very sensitive issue.

Focusing on La Faute-sur-Mer, the municipality hit hardest, the proposed presentation reveals limits in disaster prevention in France. On the one hand, 92 permanent dwellings and 582 secondary residences should be removed because they are located in the flood prone area. The French government intends to extend the PPR zones and to strengthen building regulations, thus improving resilience and adaptation. On the other hand, La Faute-sur-Mer is very reluctant to implement risk prevention plans and disaster prevention measures.

In order to understand the drivers and contextual surroundings of the Xynthia disaster, we compare La Faute-sur-Mer with Chautagne municipalities belonging to Savoie and Ain départements. All these municipalities are heavily concerned with flood risk and dike management. Their PPR date back to 2007 and clearly display the retrofitting of building regulations, mainly behind dikes. The PPR were challenged by the municipalities but finally Chautagne accepted PPR regulations whereas La Faute-sur-Mer rejected them, leading the French government to impose the regulations.

The comparison reveals strong socio-economic and political discrepancies between French municipalities. Cultural aspects as well as political fragmentation increased the local impacts of the storm surge. The case of La Faute-sur-Mer illustrates how local peculiarities in spatial planning reduce the interpretative part of natural hazards and prepare the ground for natural disasters.