

1. INTRODUCTION

Generally the word disaster refers to a catastrophe, calamity, tragedy, ruin, adversity etc. It is also described as “an occurrence that causes great distress or destruction”, “a sudden accident or a natural catastrophe that causes great damage or loss of life”. The term owes its origin to the French word ‘desastre’ meaning a bad or evil star. Disasters are also historically believed to be due to the unfavourable positioning of stars. Some comprehensive definitions have been attempted by experts recently.



Source: www.dw.de

Fig. 1.1 World Risk Index of Vulnerability to Natural Disasters

Tracing the historical evolution of the term “disaster” reveals that there has been a gradual shift in understanding the term, from initially seeing it as an “act of God” or the “wrath of nature” to a more layered perspective that integrates the role of human beings, along with the social, political and economic factors in making of a disaster.

A clear definition of the term “disaster” is critical to shape policy, practice and research to manage disasters. Over the years, the term “disaster” has come to have different meanings for

different people. 'Disaster' is defined as a crisis situation causing widespread damage which far exceeds our ability to recover. Thus, by definition, there cannot be a perfect ideal system that prevents damage, because then it would not be a disaster. When it suffocates our ability to recover, only then it can be called 'disaster'.

As per 1984 United National Disaster Relief Organization (UNDRO), disaster is an "an event, concentrated in time and space, in which a community undergoes severe damage and incurs such losses to its members and physical appurtenances that the social structure is disrupted and the fulfillment of all or some of the essential functions of the society is prevented," is a disaster.

The World Bank's operational directive (1989) describes a disaster as "an extraordinary event of limited duration or strictly speaking a natural event causing serious disruption of country's economy."

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies defines a disaster as a sudden, calamitous event that seriously disrupts the functioning of a community or society and causes human, material, and economic or environmental losses that exceed the community's or society's ability to cope with using their own resources.

In this perspective, disasters were seen as natural events like storms, floods, droughts and earthquakes. Critical to these conceptualisations of disasters were the premises of disorganisation and unpredictability and affected communities of people were clearly identifiable spatially and temporally. The emphasis on this perspective was on the post-disaster situation.

Disasters are not totally discrete events. Their possibility of occurrence, time, place and severity of the strike can be reasonably and in some cases accurately predicted by technological and scientific advances. It has been established that there is a definite pattern in their occurrences and hence we can to some extent reduce the impact of damage though we cannot reduce the extent of damage itself.

This idea has led to think that disasters are made not just by the event itself but much more by pre-existing social, economic, physical and institutional conditions and recognised that physical and social vulnerabilities have a key role to play in determining the impact/aftermath of a disaster event. This critical shift in perspective from post-disaster impacts to pre-disaster conditions substantially influenced disaster management practices.

This move can be seen in Kreps (1984) definition; disasters are “events, observable in time and space, in which societies or their larger subunits (e.g., communities, regions) incur physical damages and losses and/or disruption of their routine functioning. Both the causes and consequences of those events are related to the social structures and processes of society or their sub-units.”

This shift in focus occurred when it was observed that similar disasters affected different places and different people variously where poor people in developing countries were affected much more by disasters than in the developed countries.

Turner defined a disaster as “an event, concentrated in time and space, which threatens a society or a relatively self-sufficient sub-division of a society with major unwanted consequences as a result of the collapse of precautions which had hitherto been culturally accepted.”

Luzzari Stefarno refers to a disaster as “any occurrence causing damage, ecological disruption, loss of human lives, deterioration of health and health services on a scale sufficient to warrant any extraordinary intervention from outside the affected community.”

The term ‘Disaster’ presently is accepted as denoting any large scale calamity, whether natural or man-made, which can bring about sudden and great misery to a community in terms of loss of life or property and livelihoods. Such a calamitous event may have sudden destructive impact or may create distress over an extended period.

Tej Singh mentioned that the following factors contribute to the construction of a rational definition:

- (a) Multiple deaths or serious injuries occurring more or less simultaneously for which there is no one obvious human agent
- (b) Severe disruption of the normal life pattern
- (c) Considerable loss of life, livelihood, hardship, resource-crunch, property damage and adverse impact on health such as spread of disease or epidemics.
- (d) Considerable adverse effect on the social-structure, such as destruction of or damage to infrastructure, buildings, communications and other essential services.
- (e) Considerable disruption of community needs such as shelter, food, clothing, medical assistance and social care.
- (f) Events that by their nature, are relative, contingent and often indeterminate.
- (g) Events that are usually of a high magnitude and low-probability.
- (h) Events causing unpredicted and unexpected harm are worthy of public attention.

The disaster conceptualisation may vary but the ground reality of practice and policy is far more complex. There is a lack of consensus and consistency in definitions and classifications of disasters within sectors and agencies involved in disaster management.

Finally “Disaster Management can be defined as the organization and management of resources and responsibilities for dealing with all humanitarian aspects of emergencies, in particular the preparedness, response and recovery in order to lessen the impact of disasters.”

Disaster Management covers the range of activities designed to maintain control over disasters and emergency situations arising and to provide a framework for helping people to avoid, reduce the effects of, or recover from impact of a disaster.