

Denaturalizing Natural Disasters

Transcript

Matthew Hunt: We've all read, and heard, and likely said, the term "natural disaster": Hurricanes, earthquakes, cyclones, tsunamis. These events are contrasted to catastrophes that have been produced directly by the actions of humans: things like war, political strife, and environmental disasters such as an oil spill or mine tailings leaked into a river. Are natural disasters really natural though? Though we still use the term 'natural disasters', people have been calling for the 'denaturalizing of natural disasters' for almost 50 years. Why?

Some of these so-called natural disasters have more diffuse human origins in terms of their causes. For example, the increased frequency of extreme weather events in many places – think heat waves, droughts, forest fires, and also hurricanes and cyclones – is linked to climate change that is the result of human activity. In these cases, the causes of natural disasters are not merely natural.

Even more broadly though, denaturalizing natural disasters focuses our attention on the features that shape the *consequences* of natural disasters.

Imagine two earthquakes. They are of identical strength. The population in the locales where they occur are of the same size and distribution. Yet, these earthquakes result in vastly different levels of destruction and suffering. In one instance, tens of thousands of people are killed, infrastructure is destroyed and social tensions are exacerbated. In the other, very few buildings collapse and only dozens of people are killed and injured. Why is this so? The effects of the disasters are directly shaped by the way these societies are organized, how buildings are made, the level of economic and social inequality that exists within them. In other words, the consequences of disaster are the result of historical, social and political features of human societies.

For this reason, scholars distinguish a natural hazard, such as the earth shaking during an earthquake, from the disaster that results in terms of the consequences of the earth shaking: buildings falling, people injured or killed, environments degraded, inequalities deepened, tensions accentuated.

There are many implications of de-naturalizing natural disasters. It says things about the responsibility of individuals, groups and nations. It also suggests things about how humanitarian aid is organized. I'm going to highlight the need to look both backwards and forward!

First, the humanitarian response to sudden onset disasters is generally focused on the 'right now' and acute needs of affected populations. This is reinforced by the idea that disasters are natural. But denaturalizing natural disasters reminds us that we must account for the antecedents of the disaster- what comes before the disaster -, the features that have created these structured vulnerabilities within and between societies. Denaturalizing natural disasters suggests that questions of vulnerability and inequalities should be accounted for as early as possible in the response to catastrophes, without neglecting the importance of providing urgent assistance to those who are most in jeopardy.

This leads to the second implication, which is future oriented: that humanitarian action needs to pay attention to the longer-term consequences of the assistance that is provided. Is aid provided in a way that builds local capacity and strengthens institutions, infrastructure and civil society? At minimum, it should not undermine these things, but even more, humanitarian organizations should work with communities, local organizations and local governments with this longer-term view in mind, especially as the acuteness of the situation abates. In this sense, the success of humanitarian action should also be evaluated in terms of what is left behind.