

NATURE OF EMERGENCIES – ANIMATION TRANSCRIPT

When we discuss the ethical and justice based questions that arise in global health emergencies, natural disasters, or humanitarian crises, it is worth pausing to reflect on the evocative and normative power of terms such as emergency, disaster, or crisis.

Consider for example, the WHO declaring a public health emergency of international concern, as it did with SARS in 2002, the 2014 Ebola outbreak in Western Africa, and the 2015 Zika virus epidemic. This is not a mere descriptive term. It is a call to trigger global momentum around a public health event that is considered 'serious, sudden, unusual or unexpected'. This is of course absolutely crucial in that it allows for considerable time, resource, energy, and expertise to be dedicated to a specific health concern; attending to severe injury and suffering; and mitigating the risks associated with the emergency in question.

However, the terms emergency, disaster, or crisis also imply an event that is confined to a certain time span and geographical focus. It is an extraordinary event that requires special measures. The terms in themselves are therefore worth questioning using the lenses of ethics and justice.

For example, whether the international community 'needs to do something', so to speak, very much depends on whether, for example, an outbreak is actually labelled as an emergency. There needs to be greater ethical attention to the processes behind how this happens, who decides what counts as an emergency, and how these processes reinforce historical and current power differences in the global order.

An emergency or crisis also suggests the need for extraordinary action of rescue or care. We give an issue the medical, political, and moral attention that we would otherwise not give it. Calling something a disaster for example, implies a specific hazard that has led to increased injury and mortality and the disaster is perceived as something that requires exceptional attention and assistance.

Finally, labelling something an emergency or crisis motivates us to direct a certain kind of intervention and a finite amount of resources, without necessarily attending to the underlying structural and historical issues that might have led to the severity of the crisis in the first place.

In the Ebola responses over the last two major outbreaks, communities have expressed frustration both in the manner in which responses from the international community can sometimes disrupt existing care and health care systems, at times making social structures and institutions even more fragile. There's also frustration in the way in which international responses mobilised around specific illness (considered emergencies or crises), whereas there might be scarce response or attention when it comes to health issues that have had far greater and longer impact on those communities and will presumably continue to do so once the emergency has been contained and the responders leave.

The terms emergency, disasters or crises have implications that need further moral attention. We might want to consider what we are missing when we attend to the urgent over the underlying, who we are failing when we only attend to the acute and the severe, and what this implies for the obligations of the international community.