

## The expert view: disasters are not natural...

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# #NoNaturalDisasters

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## There's no such thing as a 'natural' disaster...

The term 'natural disaster' is incorrect and misleading.

The #NoNaturalDisasters campaign **builds on the decades of work and research carried out by DRR practitioners and academics** and aims to change the terminology to show that whilst some hazards are natural and unavoidable, the resulting disasters almost always have been made by human actions and decisions.

The discussion on why disasters are not natural isn't new. It's been written about, discussed and debated for many, many decades. This online campaign seeks to build on those discussions and reach new audiences.

Kevin,

Thank you for making the time to discuss disaster risk reduction with me, including a key point about disasters – *that they are not natural*. It's been a few years since [our last interview about disaster risk back in 2018](#), when we talked about the challenges of disaster risk funding and a need to recalibrate our approach (which still seems highly topical today in 2024). Can we start by summarising your background, and your current activities in disaster risk?

**Kevin:** *Hi Gareth and the Disasters Avoided team. Thank you for inviting me to discuss the #NoNaturalDisasters campaign.*

*As some of your readers may be aware, I have stepped back from actively managing the campaign over the past year. The campaign is now being led by a dedicated new group of volunteers. To give you some context, from 2017 to 2023 I was deeply involved in developing and running the social media campaign, which included organising a 2022 conference which focused on the idea that disasters are not natural events. We received very positive feedback from this conference, which spurred future actions.*

*More recently, I've dedicated my time to my other passion: inclusive disaster risk reduction. This involves developing reports and policy briefings that address the critical needs of hyper-marginalised groups in disaster risk reduction policy and practice.*

**Gareth:** Thanks for this overview and historic context, Kevin. Appreciating this context about your areas of focus, it would be great to discuss some key aspects to the #NoNaturalDisasters initiative. What is the core premise to the [#NoNaturalDisasters](#) campaign, and how did it come about?

**Kevin:** *The core premise of the #NoNaturalDisasters campaign is to challenge and correct the misconception that disasters are natural events. The term "natural disasters" is misleading and harmful because it obscures the human actions and decisions that exacerbate the impact of hazards.*

*This concept isn't new. Discussions about human influence on disaster outcomes date back centuries. For instance, after the devastating 1755 earthquake in Lisbon, philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau famously pointed out that the scale of the disaster was partly due to human decisions, such as constructing tall, densely packed buildings in an earthquake-prone area. Rousseau argued that if people had built differently, the damage could have been significantly reduced.*

*The #NoNaturalDisasters campaign continues this critical conversation, using social media as a modern platform to spread awareness and encourage reflection on how our choices affect disaster outcomes.*

**Gareth:** I appreciate the point you make about the fact that the term “natural disasters” is something that has been debated for centuries. Given what you have outlined about the [#NoNaturalDisasters](#) campaign, how important is it that people stop using the term “natural disasters”? Does it really matter what we call disasters, when we consider all the challenges globally that exist to reduce disaster risk and avoid disasters, and to respond effectively to those that occur?

**Kevin:** *The notion that this is "just" semantics, and that the choice of words doesn't matter, is a common response from those sceptical of the campaign's aims. However, how we frame disasters has a profound impact on how we prepare for, respond to, and recover from them. So yes, it absolutely matters.*

*When the media, policymakers, and government officials at all levels describe disasters as natural, they imply that these events are inevitable and beyond our control. This perception can significantly influence the level, type, and timing of funding allocated to disaster risk reduction, preparedness, and response.*

*As the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) [has repeatedly highlighted](#), there is a critical underinvestment in preventing disasters, with much more focus placed on responding to them.*

*While disaster response through aid and assistance is crucial, if we start framing disasters as preventable and their impacts as manageable, we might see a shift in funding priorities—towards preparedness and mitigation rather than just response.*

**Gareth:** I think we are going to use these words in some of our work to help do our bit for the #NoNaturalDisasters campaign – thanks for the concise explanation!

Related to this, in our Disasters Avoided initiative we talk about the critical need to have the right mindset about avoiding disasters and to have good governance and investment in place to implement the right action. Linked to this point, when disasters do occur, why do you think the media keeps describing disasters as “natural”? I know that many of us (me included) have suggested to various media outlets that they stop referring to natural disasters, including providing them with links to [the UNDRR campaign](#) about this and [the #NoNaturalDisasters campaign](#), yet it usually fails to materialise in any real or lasting change.

I wonder if there is a central media body or some other mechanism that can influence a change of wording and communication about disasters across the global media, rather than trying to persuade individual media organisations?

**Kevin:** *Firstly, thank you, Gareth, and the Disasters Avoided team for being so vocal on this issue. It's indeed a marathon, not a sprint, and sustained efforts like yours are crucial in keeping up the pressure to eliminate the term "natural" when describing disasters.*

*It can feel disheartening when the message doesn't seem to stick, especially as the term "natural disasters" remains so prevalent. But we must remember that we're challenging decades of entrenched language. Changing this ingrained terminology is a gradual process, particularly within mainstream media, where many journalists covering disasters may not specialise in the subject.*

*Regarding a central media body to drive this change, we haven't identified one yet. We've engaged with national journalism societies, but the progress is slow. Influencing language in media is a complex task that requires persistent advocacy and education across the board.*

**Gareth:** You make a very good point, Kevin, about remembering the context that we are working with when trying to change people's way of framing disasters. We will keep flying the #NoNaturalDisasters flag, we can assure you of that.

Perhaps a key point to talking about disasters, and to framing them, is defining what we mean by them – and various definitions exist. In [the 1-minute YouTube video introduction clip on the #NoNaturalDisasters website](#) you refer to a definition the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent (IFRC) used, which, as of September 2024 has evolved ([on their website](#)) to: *“Disasters are serious disruptions to the functioning of a community that exceed its capacity to cope using its own resources.*

*Disasters can be caused by natural, man-made and technological hazards, as well as various factors that influence the exposure and vulnerability of a community.”*

In our [Disasters Avoided](#) work we put forward the following definition, which has some similarities to the IFRC one (we made ours as short as possible):

[A major situation requiring outside support for coping.](#)

With the help of the No Natural Disasters campaign, are you seeing greater recognition by government decision-makers and those involved in disaster risk about how hazards can be but are not always natural, and how disasters are *not* natural? If so, is this recognition making a tangible difference towards policies, funding and action towards disaster risk reduction and preventing disasters from occurring ([your briefing document](#) on the #NoNaturalDisasters website describes the ethos of the movement, and ISO standards for disaster risk such as [ISO/TR 6030:2022](#) and [ISO 22328-1:2020](#) also clearly avoid using the term natural disasters)?

***Kevin:** We’ve seen significant successes with the #NoNaturalDisasters campaign, with several major international organisations adopting the message including the UNDRR, PreventionWeb, and INGOs like [ShelterBox](#), Start Network, and regional offices of Oxfam and Save the Children. We do believe that change is happening. However, as you mentioned earlier it remains an uphill journey.*

*Given the often-confidential nature of government policy and aid agency spending decisions, we haven’t yet seen explicit evidence linking the campaign to specific policy changes. That said, we’re confident that the campaign’s message is being considered in these spaces.*

*Regarding definitions, while we initially used the IFRC’s definition because of its broad recognition, the campaign’s message transcends any single definition of disaster. Our focus is on challenging the use of the word "natural" when describing disasters, regardless of the specific definition in use. As long as the term "natural" is avoided, the campaign’s core message – that disasters are shaped by human decisions – remains relevant and powerful.*

**Gareth:** We appreciate the point about how the #NoNaturalDisasters campaign transcends different definitions. I’d like to return to a linked topic, that of the media and in particular discussing good media examples linked to the #NoNaturalDisasters campaign. As such an example, Anita van Breda, Senior Director, Environment and Disaster Management for the World Wildlife Fund, wrote [a piece that CNN published in August 2024 about “Why there is no such thing as a ‘natural’ disaster”](#). This piece describes how “the word “natural” implies these events are entirely out of our control, thereby absolving us of the responsibility to prepare and reduce risk from natural hazards.”

Anita's context links to [two factors in particular in the six-factor model](#) of our Disasters Avoided work, which is that people need (1) the right mindset to avoid disasters, which includes knowing that disasters are not natural and (2) having good governance in place.

Is part of the #NoNaturalDisasters campaign about focusing on how decision-makers at all levels must face up to the risks we face from all hazards (natural and others) and implement action (with the right investment, another of our model factors) to reduce risk and avoid disasters? Research keeps telling us that the majority of spending on disasters is still on post-event response rather than reducing the risk hazards represent.

**Kevin:** *In short, yes. A core goal of the #NoNaturalDisasters campaign is to influence decision-makers who have the power, funding, and resources to drive meaningful change. That's why our messaging is directed at those working within disaster risk reduction and management, as well as those influencing these spaces through media and policy, rather than the general public.*

*As we've often pointed out, if a member of the public uses the term "natural disaster," it has little impact on how we respond to hazards. However, when a prime minister, president, or other government official uses that term, it can significantly influence response processes and funding decisions.*

*The persistent focus on post-event response over preparedness and risk reduction is indeed a major issue, as you noted. Addressing this imbalance is critical if we are to shift from merely reacting to disasters to proactively preventing them.*

**Gareth:** Governance works at a personal level, too, coupled with another of our six factors, the right investment. It's not always easy, but when people are able to protect their homes against hazards when they live in known high-risk areas, it could make the difference between keeping their home and belongings, or their business, or losing it all. We have documented a few of these examples in [our case studies](#). I wonder if a better understanding about hazards and how we need to work with and respect nature would increase the commitment of individuals and communities to increase their resilience, if they have the means to do so (which isn't always the case, unfortunately, and in these cases they need external support)?

**Kevin:** *Yes, a recognition and understanding of the risks faced by communities is crucial. However, it's important to acknowledge that the most vulnerable – often the poorest and those with the least social capital – are typically the hardest hit by disasters. Research and practical experience consistently show that these communities are disproportionately affected due to their limited resources and weaker social and economic standing.*

*Moreover, the power dynamics in decision-making around planning and policy are significant. These communities frequently have less economic power and fewer opportunities to engage with decision-makers who influence policies that directly impact their resilience.*

*While individual and community-level resilience is vital, it's equally important to ensure that those without the means to protect themselves receive the necessary external support. This highlights the need for equitable investment in disaster risk reduction and the importance of inclusive governance that considers the voices and needs of all communities, especially the most vulnerable.*

**Gareth:** Thank you very much for your time, Kevin. We really appreciate it. We know that there is a continued focus to drive positive actions to avoid disasters through the #NoNaturalDisasters campaign, and the Disasters Avoided team will continue to back this and to help to spread the message.