Emergency management—both as an area of study and an emerging profession—is relatively young, and, as such, is going through considerable growing pains. One persistent problem is the lack of uniform definitions of key terms by scholars and practitioners (including this author). Among the many concepts that do not, as yet, have an exact definition is the term “hazard.” Lack of agreement regarding how to define this term hurts our understanding of the multicausality of disasters and may adversely affect emergency management (EM) policies and their chances for implementation.

There are two schools of thought regarding the concept of hazards, but it is worth noting that there is not always consistency about which perspective is accepted and applied. One view is that hazards are reducible to the physical events that trigger disasters. This interpretation of hazards is illustrated in the following definitions:

- Elements in the physical environment harmful to man and caused by factors extraneous to him;
- Hazards triggered by climatic and geological variability, which is at least partly beyond the control of human activity;
- Natural phenomena that have the potential to cause fatal and costly damage, such as lightning, windstorms, and floods;
- An extreme geophysical event capable of causing a disaster;
- Natural geologic processes such as floods, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and drought;
- Hazardous processes, such as massive volcanic eruptions, that are beyond human influence; and
- Events accompanied by a violent release of energy exceeding the capacity of human beings to modify their environment.

The second, and currently more popular, perspective on hazards acknowledges the role of the physical environment but also acknowledges the complex relationship between hazards and human activity. The definitions provided below reflect this approach:

- An interaction between a system of human resource management and an extreme or rare natural phenomenon;
a product of risk, vulnerability, exposure, and the capacity of humans to respond to extreme events;  
a threat to people and the things they value arising from the interaction between social, technological, and natural systems;  
a threatening condition that exists because humans and their activities are constantly exposed to natural forces;  
a naturally occurring or human-induced process, or event with the potential to create loss; that is, a general source of future danger;  
a predisaster situation in which risk exists primarily because the human population has placed itself in a position of vulnerability; and  
a source of danger whose evaluation encompasses three elements: the risk of human harm, the risk of property damage, and the acceptability of a degree of risk.

Although this second school of thought is substantially different than the first, those who espouse it frequently refer back to the former, thus rendering the human element a secondary place in the causation of disaster. For instance, one of the proponents of the latter school observes that hazards may be geophysical, atmospheric, or biological in origin. Other research makes similar references, giving the impression that these potentialities are reducible to their sources (environmental, climatological, geophysical, biological, technological, or civil/conflict origin).

It is apparent that most individuals assume a hazard to be the latent threat or active agent that triggers disasters. This view is not incorrect, and, understandably, it is widely used. However, the desire to put this definition of hazards at the center of EM presents unrecognized challenges for the field. Problems inevitably arise when we rely heavily on this concept because it inadvertently downplays human culpability for disasters. The first view tends to completely overlook the role of people, policies, and politics, and the second, while acknowledging vulnerability, relegates it to an inferior position.

According to Blaikie et al., “Too much emphasis in doing something about disasters is put on natural hazards themselves, and not nearly enough on the social environment and its processes.” In other words, we focus excessively on the disaster agent and insufficiently on what we can and should do to better minimize impact and deal with the aftermath. This is ironic in that we cannot stop earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, and the like. We have some control over technological and other anthropogenic hazards (e.g., a hazardous materials spill or a terrorist attack), but our ability to prevent them may be curtailed because of the negligent or intentional actions of others (e.g., businesses that ignore regulations or political extremists who want to intimidate others).

In contrast to the often uncontrollable nature of hazards, we do have the ability to determine our degree of vulnerability to various threats based on our mitigation and preparedness efforts. While it is undoubtedly true that vulnerability can never be completely eliminated, we can and must do more to reduce our risk and susceptibility through land-use planning, improved construction, enforced regulations, insurance coverage, and institution building, among other things.

Scholars have long proposed that we reconsider the “naturalness” of disasters, arguing that we must acknowledge the social construction of such events. It is my opinion that over-reliance on the term hazards in EM perpetuates the myth that we have absolutely no influence over disasters. There are numerous cases of this among civilians, politicians, and the media. Some notable examples come from the 1997 and 1998 Peruvian disasters related to El Niño. During several interviews, taxi drivers decried the effects of El Niño and then asked, almost verbatim, “but what can be done against Mother Nature?” One presidential minister said the government was not to blame because the flooding was part of a natural phenomenon, while the director of Peru’s
Sea Institute reportedly stated, “If it wasn’t for El Niño, the Andes Mountain chain, and the Humbolt current, we would be drinking piña coladas like those in the Caribbean.”

Evidence suggests that we must give greater priority to vulnerability if we are to overcome the attitudinal barriers impeding the progress of effective EM. Many in the field agree with the importance of this concept.20,21 This is not to deny the value of the hazards concept and the need to comprehend complex physical, technological, and anthropological agents. More dialogue among scholars and practitioners will be needed to evaluate the relative merits of these concepts in the future. Hopefully, we will be more sensitive to the possibility that our professional vocabulary may directly or indirectly influence our ability to reduce the frequency and impact of disasters.

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REFERENCES