#NoNaturalDisasters in the workplace

IMPROVING HOW WE TALK ABOUT DISASTERS AT WORK

Part of the #NoNaturalDisasters campaign

www.nonaturaldisasters.com
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Background

The #NoNaturalDisasters campaign has been hundreds of years in the making. In fact, as early as the 1700’s there was recognition that the cause of a disaster might be something other than a natural process. In a letter between Jean-Jacques Rousseau and François-Marie Arouet (a.k.a Voltaire) in 1756 discussing the 1755 earthquake in Lisbon, Portugal, Rousseau states:

‘... nature did not construct twenty thousand houses of six to seven stories [...], and that if inhabitants of this great city were more equally spread out and more lightly lodged, the damage would have been much less and perhaps to no account...’

Indeed, the idea that disasters are not natural and are in fact caused by human decisions in planning, policy and other societal actions has been discussed, considered and worked on for decades.

The most recent addition to this centuries-old discussion is our #NoNaturalDisasters Twitter account and consolidated online campaign, which was launched in June 2018. Our aim is simple: to use the scale and reach of social media to inform and educate people and/ or organisations (often in positions of privilege) within the disaster risk sector that using 'natural' to describe disasters was incorrect.

Since its launch, the campaign has grown to include a dedicated website, patreon supporters, thousands of followers on multiple platforms, and many citations in mainstream media articles.

We use these platforms to share our position: If we recognise and accept the standard definition of disaster as a serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society at any scale due to hazardous events interacting with conditions of exposure, vulnerability and capacity, then we must consider human involvement at the core of that process.

A hazard will only become a disaster should it impact the workings of a society or community. As such, a disaster can only happen where a society or community exists. When a hazard reaches an area of human habitation, policies including decisions around the built environment and social welfare can increase the impacts of that hazard. What’s worse, using 'natural' to describe disasters misleads people to think the devastating results are inevitable, out of our control, and are simply part of a natural process. Hazards (earthquakes, hurricanes, pandemics, drought etc) are inevitable but the impact they have on society is not.

This campaign aims to halt decades of using incorrect terminology and to highlight the implications of using such terminology.

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1. [https://www.preventionweb.net/publications/view/65974](https://www.preventionweb.net/publications/view/65974)
3. [https://twitter.com/NoNatDisasters](https://twitter.com/NoNatDisasters)
Why words matter in places of work

The average person will spend 90,000 hours at work over a lifetime. During that time an average worker will use terminology relevant to the job they are performing many times a day, often without considering the basic meaning of the term, its evolution over time, its phrasing or even whether the term itself is correct. Over time, the repetition of that word or phrase can enforce a way of thinking that can often become ingrained within the organisational culture of that workplace. Within the disaster risk reduction, humanitarian, international development or climate change focused sectors, this reinforcement of incorrect terminology is particularly troublesome. Allowing (unchallenged) the assumption that natural hazards will always cause damage to a society or community because it’s a natural process, could lead to a culture of risk-acceptance and broader apathy.

As such, ensuring the correct use of terms within the disaster risk reduction or humanitarian sector is vitally important. Many of the issues discussed or communicated within our places of work are often complex and multi-faceted with numerous historical inputs and nuances that may or may not be applicable in contemporary language.

The phrase ‘natural disaster’ is one such example of this. The term has been used by DRR and humanitarian professionals, policy-makers, the media and even the dictionary for decades and as such, it is widespread within the majority of workplaces.

In many of those settings, the use of 'natural' to describe the impacts of a hazard or emergency event is being used incorrectly. The reinforcement of that word through daily conversations, emails, presentations and other workplace communication fails to reflect that the disaster (e.g. the impact of the naturally occurring hazard) isn’t natural and is instead caused by anthropogenic decisions through planning, policy and research.

This lack of awareness becomes even more pronounced when discussed on externally facing communication. Whether through external publications, job titles or through social media, the use of 'natural' to describe disasters when consumed by people not working in the sector only reinforces the message that disasters are an inevitable part of life.

As such, part of the wider #NoNaturalDisasters discussion will now begin to focus on the workplace and how the description of disasters is framed both on internal and external facing communications. Covering communication from conversations, emails, job titles and presentations, the #NoNaturalDisasters in the Workplace campaign will aim to educate through the provision of tool kits, online resources, evidence and discussions to allow anyone wanting to spread the #NoNaturalDisasters message to do so within their place of work, to colleagues or elsewhere.

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5 [https://www.gettysburg.edu/news/stories?id=79db7b34-630c-4f49-ad32-4ab9ea48e72b&pageTitle=1%2F3+of+your+life+is+spent+at+work](https://www.gettysburg.edu/news/stories?id=79db7b34-630c-4f49-ad32-4ab9ea48e72b&pageTitle=1%2F3+of+your+life+is+spent+at+work)
The survey and its findings

The survey started on 29 April 2020 and was announced on the #NoNaturalDisasters Twitter profile. The announcement tweet was retweeted 50 times.

The aim of the survey was to explore what language is used in the context of disasters within the respondents' place of work? We particularly focused on the use of 'ND', seeking to collect information around the following aspects; seniority (to ascertain the degree to which the respondent might have the power to change organisational terminology) and the medium in the ND term was shared (verbal, written, through office administration etc). The survey had a total of 11 questions (annex 1).

The survey closed on 24 May 2020. During the period the survey was open (26 days) it received 122 responses.

Findings

The vast majority of those surveyed (97%) work in organisations with specific focus on disasters or humanitarian emergencies. 92% of those responding had heard colleagues use the term ‘natural disaster’ during conversation in the workplace. 60% answered that their organisation used internal or external facing literature that also used the term. Of that literature, printed material (such as flyers, posters and informational pamphlets) were most commonly used, with online sources (websites, email text etc) next, and then administrative purposes (job titles, department names etc) as the third most common use of ‘natural’ to describe disasters.

Those respondents (65%) who had challenged the terminology within their workplace reported having a mixed response. Most colleagues who were spoken to were open to the argument and either hadn't considered the issue before or understood and accepted the respondents point of view. However, still there was a significant minority of people (27 of the 119) who were against changing their own terminology.

Just under half of respondents thought their organisation would be open to the idea of officially changing their terminology to remove the ND term at 48%. A further 13% answered no.

Of the 119 respondents to answer all questions, the majority considered a move into the workplace a valid next phase in the #NoNaturalDisasters campaign, with many requesting specific tool sets & literature aimed at a more professional audience.

7 https://twitter.com/NoNatDisasters/status/1255428701031989249?s=20
The aim of the broader #NoNaturalDisasters campaign is to politely engage with and educate people or organisations about why the use of ‘natural’ to describe disasters is incorrect. This has been achieved via social media, published articles, and general advocacy. This has proved largely successful and has led to discussion and changes from various individuals and organisations.

What the campaign so far hasn’t achieved is the large scale, organisational change of view. As highlighted in the survey findings, those working within DRR, emergency management and humanitarian organisations are still hearing and reading ‘natural’ on a regular basis as a part of their professional life. This research has highlighted a clear need to expand our messaging and develop ways to assist colleagues within these sectors who wish to inform and correct terminology used in their workplaces.

With almost all respondents stating they work in an organisation that either has or continues to use the ND term to describe disasters, and almost all respondents (92%) answering that they had heard colleagues use the ND term the challenge to correct and counter this incorrect terminology is clear.

A prominent message received throughout the survey was that a lack of evidence and professional-facing tools to allow these conversations to happen, was stopping many individuals and organisations adopting the change in terminology more widely. This mirrored the repeated calls for a tool-kit based approach in developing the message through our more general and informal social media campaign.

There had been a decision by the administrator of the #NoNaturalDisasters twitter account to focus the campaign thus far on personal or institutional twitter accounts of DRR-specific individuals and organisations only. It was hoped that this would achieve a degree of change in the type of language used on the platform. But the tools offered so far haven’t been designed to target internal workings of organisations and their employees.

Listening to the information provided through the survey and contact with current advocates, this new phase in the #NoNaturalDisasters campaign will begin to target wider, whole-organisation audiences. Working through partnerships and with a broader consolidation of our existing messages, we will work with the portion of the DRR community already advocating the message that disasters are not natural and begin to provide real, practical solutions that have worked for others in organisational settings.
Improving terminology in your organisation

Achieving change within terminology at an organisational level should be viewed as a long-term process. Changing the way a company uses words and phrases (often formed through strongly held views, precedent and multidisciplinary expertise) will be complex and take a concerted campaigning effort.

However, once the decision has been made to start that discussion in the workplace, consider using some of the suggestions below:

**Suggestion 1 - Positivity**

We’re all human and none of us like to be told we’re wrong (especially if we’ve based a career around a term that others find to be incorrect). As such, engaging with colleagues and supervisors who might be cynical, should be an approach focused on positivity.

**Try this:** “You’re wider points on [enter subject matter] are spot on. Thanks for this. Did you ever consider that the message you’re putting across could be more effective if you removed ‘natural’ as a descriptor?”

**Suggestion 2 - Peer to peer learning**

The purpose of this new aspect of our campaign is to broaden understanding of the #NoNaturalDisasters ethos within a larger portion of the DRR and humanitarian sector. This process should be framed as a learning opportunity and one that allows us to consider broader arguments around risk creation & mitigation.

**Try this:** Suggest working with a colleague who you know is cynical of the #NoNaturalDisasters message & use the opportunity to provide suggestions & ideas that build on the #NoNaturalDisasters campaign.

**Suggestion 3 - Evidence**

Much of our campaign is based around the idea that using ‘natural’ to describe disasters isn’t accurate and misrepresents the human-based decisions and processes that turn a hazard into a disaster. Backing this up with further (suggested) reading and listening is vital to get buy-in.

**Try this:** “Have you seen this paper by [add relevant authors or publication] on why disasters aren’t natural?” or “I was listening to an excellent podcast on why disasters aren’t natural and thought you might enjoy this particular episode [link to Disasters: Deconstructed S1E16]”

**Suggestion 4 - Be proactive**

Waiting for the perfect opportunity to bring up the #NoNaturalDisasters campaign may never arise in day to day conversation. Or it might feel too intimidating to bring the point up during conversations on a 1:1 basis with peers or supervisors. If so, try to think up opportunities where you can informally bring up the campaign and be in control of the message.

**Try this:** Lunchtime learning sessions can be a good way to discuss a topic that might be difficult to bring up in day to day interactions. It allows you to control the message initially *(through hosting the event or working with like minded colleagues to host)* and then engage through a wider group discussion after you’ve presented your point.
Campaign - next steps

Over the coming months, the #NoNaturalDisasters campaign will begin to provide the tools needed to facilitate these discussions. The resources will provide information and guidance to begin discussing and educating colleagues and peers on why disasters are not natural.

The tools will be open-access, easily tailored to your specific organisation and available to anyone who wants to start discussing the campaign in their place of work:

A #NoNaturalDisasters in the Workplace presentation template

A powerpoint presentation template (*incl. coverage of all official UN languages over time*) with the basic slides on why this discussion is important and how an organisation can begin this process. Aimed at a general audience, the presentation will allow amendments to be made to fit the specific needs of your own organisation.

Templates (fliers, emails & letters)

Beginning the process of changing language within your organisation may start with a flyer, email or letter to your line management, your team or the broader organisation. These templates will provide the required background information, design and formatting and allow editing to work for your specific organisational requirements (*all UN official languages provided over time*).

Seminars on changing the language of disasters in your workplace

We'll be running a series of online seminars aimed at those wanting to change the language of disasters in their own organisation. Using experts in HR, organisational change management, public relations and the #NoNaturalDisasters campaign, the seminars will provide the opportunity to discuss your organisational requirements with experts and hear from others on what has or hasn't worked within their workplace.

These seminars will be free to all and will be held to facilitate different time zones.

Reading lists

Building on a key requirement of changing language in the workplace, the reading lists will provide hand-picked articles on the issue of language and terminology in disaster risk reduction and humanitarian action. It will also provide the evidence and knowledge needed to ensure you are able to discuss the topic with peers and colleagues.

Continued engagement with influencers

We will continue to work with influencers within the DRR, international development, humanitarian and climate change related sectors to build support for the #NoNaturalDisasters message. This engagement will seek to get the support of those with large audiences and levels of influence.
Acknowledgements

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Annex 1

List of survey questions

1. Do you work for an organisation where disasters or emergency events are discussed as part of a professional dialogue?
2. If you answered yes to the previous question, have you heard the term ‘natural disaster’ used by colleagues?
3. Does your organisation have internal or external literature that uses ‘natural’ to describe disasters?
4. If you answered yes to the previous question, please select all forms of media where you’ve seen ‘natural’ being used to describe disasters
5. Have you attempted to challenge or change the use of ‘natural’ to describe disasters in your workplace? If so, what response have you received?
6. Do you think your organisation would be open to change its terminology (both internally and externally facing)? Please use the ‘other’ section to detail why?
7. Is there anything the #NoNaturalDisasters campaign team can do to help change terminology in your organisation?
8. Which sector do you work for?
9. What is your position within the organisation?
10. Do you have direct supervision of any staff?
11. If you’d like to stay up to date with this campaign, please leave your email below:
DISASTERS ARE NOT NATURAL

#NoNaturalDisasters

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