

# Hazards, emergencies, disasters, and catastrophes

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Hazard, Catastrophe, Emergency and Disaster Defining the terms hazard, catastrophe, emergency and disaster In several instances, the words “hazard,” “catastrophe,” “emergency” and “disaster” are used interchangeably. According to Pearce (2000), this is because these terms have less clear distinction in their meaning. Their definitions are overlapping. However, following the Oxford Canadian Dictionary (qtd. in Pearce, 2000), these terms have a clear difference in meaning, and it has to be noted when using them.

According to the Oxford Canadian Dictionary (qtd. in Pearce, 2000) the term emergency refers to a serious situation. Disaster refers to a more serious situation than emergency, whereas catastrophe means the situation with the most serious impact of them all.

Pearce (200) explains a disaster as an unusual happening that is beyond the ability of the affected area to respond and mitigate it. Moreover, the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (2009) Terminology defines disaster as a serious disruption of the normal working of a region with an impact that exceeds the resources of the affected region to counter it.

Therefore UNISDR (2009) gives examples of disasters such as regional wars, epidemics like Ebola, economic depressions and recession, environmental degradation and accidents.

UNISDR (2000) defines an emergency as a crisis that calls for a quick action. Emergencies include: fire, robbery and other crimes, strikes and electricity breakdowns. These are all events that require a quick remedial action to mitigate them.

According to Pearce (2000) a hazard is the likelihood of a disaster. Harris et al. (qtd. in Pearce, 2000) says that hazards refer to threats to what people  
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value and to the people themselves. Therefore Pearce (2000) gives examples of hazards such as: diseases, infestations, and poor control of technology, lighting and infrastructure failures. These all result in massive losses of human or what they value.

Doane (1990) defines a catastrophe as a tragic happening caused by a fatal misfortune. A catastrophe causes a sudden change in a characteristic or structure of the earth. Examples include earthquakes, land folding, tsunamis, global warming and floods. These are natural misfortunes that can change a feature of the earth.

In conclusion, the terms hazard, emergency, disaster and catastrophe have a distinction in their meaning. Therefore, users of these words have to bear in mind these differences so as not to interchangeably use them.

#### References

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