

Are natural disasters really natural? This question underscores the issues around the dichotomization of disaster events, which in ways have been useful in identifying the causes of disasters and the viable solutions to prevent and mitigate their effects. Such a label of natural disasters creates an attitude that such things are beyond us, that they will happen whether we like it or not and there is not much that we can do in preventing them from happening. As such, preventive work around such disasters focused on setting up the infrastructure and the expertise for prediction of these “natural” events that allows the prevention of the catastrophic effects that they cause and the preparation of what is needed to mitigate the other consequences.

The topic and the readings for this week, though, blurs the lines by which we are able to classify some disasters specifically those that have long been considered “natural”. Professor Epstein’s work on climate stability and its effects articulates how the natural disasters such as floods, drought, hurricanes are not just a result of what is naturally happening in terms of the weather and climate. Instead, human factor is put into play as the single most important contributor to the cause of the warming up of the globe, build up of greenhouse gases specifically carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, which in turn is leading to the current climate instability. In the article “*Assessing Climate Stability*,” Epstein and McCarthy point out that “given the pace of warming today, the anomalies in the World Ocean, the acceleration of the hydrological cycle, the associated increase in weather variability, and growing instabilities in the cryosphere...we are already observing signs of instability within the climate system.” And according to Epstein in the article “*Is Global Warming Harmful to Health?*” this very same instability is what’s causing the obvious – warming of oceans, melting of glaciers brining about rising sea levels, erratic weather patterns, more sever storms – to the less obvious such as expansion of the incidence and distribution of many serious medical disorders. Epstein writes about what computer models are predicting in terms of the surge of new diseases and the resurgence of old diseases as a result of the heating atmosphere. But, in the same breath, he identifies signs and patterns that are already being seen not in models but in actual events that such surge and resurgence are already happening particularly in terms of vector-borne diseases such as malaria (*Biological and Physical Signs of Climate Change: Focus on Mosquito-borne Diseases; Climate and Health*).

If we are to use a natural disaster framework in terms of the effects that Epstein et al have identified, the tendency will be to accept this as a phenomenon we have very little control of and that all we are capable of doing is determining the consequences of climate change, monitoring them and mitigating the effects. This, however, precludes the underlying causative factor of climate change and the contributory role of human activity to this process. Few scientists doubt that the atmosphere is warming. But, what is at the crux of the debate now on climate change is whether or not this is a natural phenomenon that is bound to happen or that it is something that we and our human activities have pushed to the point that it is already unnatural. Obviously, these differing perspectives bring about differing solutions. But, as Epstein writes, “in the face of observable instabilities, insufficiencies in modeling non-linear events can no longer justify delays in precautionary action.”