

What is a disaster?

A disaster takes place when the following three conditions occur at the same time:

- ▶ When people live in hazardous places like, for example, close to an active volcano, on unstable slopes where landslides are likely to happen, or close to rivers which could flood.
- ▶ When a hazardous phenomenon occurs, be it natural or human-made.
- ▶ When the phenomenon also causes a lot of damage, especially where no preventive measures have been taken.

Are disasters caused by people or by nature?

Natural phenomena can sometimes strike very hard and cause disasters if preventive measures have not been taken or if some human activities have harmed the natural environment or upset the balance of the ecosystem.

For instance, too much water that the soil is unable to absorb can cause floods, while too little water in some regions can lead to drought. But people can make the situation worse, for example when trees are chopped down and no new ones are planted. This makes the soil very dry and dusty, which can lead to erosion. When the rains come, there are not enough roots and vegetation to bind the soil together, and a landslide can occur.

Most wildfires are caused directly or indirectly by people. Farmers, for example, sometimes burn their fields to get rid of weeds before planting, and the fire can get out of control. Sometimes people are careless with cigarettes or forget to put out bonfires when they go camping. A little spark is sometimes all it takes to start a fire.

If we destroy parts of nature such as coral reefs, forests, or fragile mountain plants, we are destroying the natural barriers that protect us from tsunamis, drought, landslides, floods and other hazards.

