With earthquakes devastating Indonesia , and fires raging in the United States , there has been plenty of discussion of so-called “natural disasters” in recent weeks.

These disasters – and the continuing record global temperatures – has again brought to our attention the growing field of climate change attribution , which investigates the links between climate change and extreme weather events.

But we need a broader perspective as well.

Climate change is often seen in itself as a “hazard”. But really it should be seen as a mechanism by which hazards are changing, and will continue to change. It is a “hazard influencer”.

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Disasters aren’t actually all that natural . The reality is that social structures harm and disadvantage individuals, putting them at risk of harm when exposed to hazard.

Poverty and inequality are much more entrenched causes of disaster than any hazard (or climate change) is. There is a danger that by focusing on the “grand narrative” of global change – and flashy technological solutions – we obscure the reality of everyday risk experienced by the most marginalised people in our world.

What makes a disaster?

Picture, for example, an earthquake in Antarctica. (Actually, these are reasonably common .) Is this a disaster? Of course not. It is a hazard.

Now picture the same earthquake in a poor urban district of a developing country. The human toll taken by such an earthquake might would indeed be a disaster.

Disasters are therefore socially and politically constructed . Vulnerability – poverty, homesslessness, lack of infrastructure – is a much larger factor in an individual's risk than any natural hazard.

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While climate change makes certain extreme weather events much more likely to occur, we need to consider carefully the narratives of climate change and disasters that we use. How these stories are framed is crucial if we want to reach people with a message that inspires action.

Ignoring inequality

We must not assume that "managing" either hazards or hazard influencers will necessarily change anything for vulnerable people. To make a difference in their lives, we must address the structural violence that exposes them to higher risk than those in affluent societies.

Some now even advocate for a shift towards talking about " risk creation ". This moves the conversation away from poorer communities that often suffer disasters (and cannot rebuild) towards those responsible for causing the problems in the first place.

This kind of conversation is missing or marginal at all high-level forums. It appears easier to score political points by claiming to have found a technical way to treat the symptom.

The narrative of destruction

Stories are incredibly important for us in understanding disasters. People tell stories to cope with trauma, to demonstrate solidarity, and to connect with others.

But what we see from the media in particular is a narrative that focuses on destruction. These narratives gloss over difference, focus on the spectacular, and entirely dismiss social factors.

The narratives are often deliberately blind to race, gender and class. By focusing on short-term impacts, hero stories and sensational individual accounts, the myth of a homogenous society is sustained. This is more striking in the US than anywhere else.

This narrative fails to get to the root cause of disasters or provide any useful way to help the most marginalised people in the long term.

We are seeing a similar trend with climate change narratives. There is a danger of focusing on the wrong problem. That is why talking about justice is so important. This includes both the right of the global south to development, and the rights of those who are most disadvantaged in richer societies.

They are the people that will suffer most from the impacts of climate change. But most of them are already suffering and will continue to. Particularly if we do not actually address the problems they face every day.

Blaming climate change for disasters plays into the myth of “natural disasters” to some degree. The narrative is therefore fundamentally misleading.

How do narratives affect action?

Making the entire climate change argument about weaning ourselves off fossil fuels and onto “clean energy” leaves the root causes of injustice to fester – inequality, discrimination, marginalisation and an economic system built on exploitation.

We desperately need to pursue a climate change narrative that deals with these root causes and advocates for more than a technocratic fix .

The narrative of climate change must be widened to encompass intractable issues of social, environmental and economic justice. Otherwise we may argue for (and get) clean energy and yet still leave the world much worse for many members of future generations.

How we construct our narrative is critical. If we do not recognise the right problem, our solutions will miss the mark.

Big polluters are “ going green ” so as to continue making profits. This is not just about fossil fuels, or even just about climate change. More broadly, we must address the ideology of limitless growth and consumption.

Otherwise, predatory corporations may indeed agree to the climate change actions that we demand – but most likely they will have simply found a new way to exploit us.

Jason von Meding does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

Authors: Jason von Meding, Senior Lecturer in Disaster Risk Reduction, University of Newcastle

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