

Critical Discourse Analysis of Environmental Disasters in Sierra Leone

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the discourse surrounding environmental disasters in Sierra Leone, using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explore how language, power dynamics, and socio-political factors shape public understanding and responses to crises. The study focuses on the 2017 Freetown landslide and other environmental disasters, analyzing the narratives constructed by government officials, NGOs, and the media. These narratives often deflect responsibility from systemic governance failures, such as poor urban planning and deforestation, onto marginalized communities like informal settlers and women. The study highlights the exclusion of vulnerable groups from disaster management discussions, emphasizing the need for more inclusive governance and community-based resilience strategies. The paper concludes that addressing the root causes of vulnerability, including governance deficiencies and socio-economic inequalities, is essential for mitigating future disasters in Sierra Leone.

Keywords: Environmental Sociology, Critical Discourse, Disaster, Language, Power Dynamics

1. Introduction

Environmental disasters have become increasingly prevalent and destructive worldwide, with developing countries bearing the brunt of their impacts. Sierra Leone, located on the West African coast, is no stranger to such disasters. With a history of landslides, flooding, and other catastrophes, the country is vulnerable due to both its geographical characteristics and socio-economic conditions. This article critically examines the discourse surrounding environmental disasters in Sierra Leone, exploring how language, power relations, and socio-political dynamics shape the narrative and public understanding of these crises.

The research employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the language and narratives used by various stakeholders, including government officials, NGOs, and local communities (Philips, 2007; Winter-Jørgensen and Phillips, 2000). This methodological approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the power dynamics at play, revealing how discourse shapes and is shaped by social and political contexts. Through this lens, the study seeks to uncover the underlying assumptions, biases, and implications of disaster-related communications in Sierra Leone, ultimately contributing to more informed and equitable disaster management practices (Adger, 2006; Cutter et al., 2003).

This introduction aims to set the stage for a comprehensive analysis of environmental disasters in Sierra Leone, emphasizing the importance of integrating local knowledge and perspectives into broader disaster resilience efforts (Gaillard and Mercer, 2012; Shaw, 2006). The lessons from Freetown's 2017 disaster illustrate the urgent need for improved urban planning, enforcement of environmental regulations, and a stronger focus on community-based resilience strategies to prevent future catastrophes (World Bank, 2019).

2. Problem Statement

Environmental disasters in Sierra Leone, particularly events like the Freetown landslide of 2017, have raised concerns about the narratives that shape public understanding and governmental responses. The way these disasters are framed in public discourse can influence policy-making, the allocation of resources, and the perception of responsibility. This paper investigates how environmental disasters are discussed by government officials, media, and NGOs, particularly focusing on power dynamics in these discourses.

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It also explores the ways in which marginalized communities, such as women, informal settlers, and the urban poor, are affected by and represented in these narratives. The central issue is the tendency to shift responsibility from systemic governance failures to vulnerable communities, obscuring the real structural causes of disasters.

3. Objectives

The objectives of the study are:

- To explore the framing of environmental disasters in Sierra Leone, focusing on the language used by government, media, and NGOs.
- To assess the role of power relations in shaping disaster narratives, particularly the influence of elite actors.
- To examine the representation of marginalized communities, including women and informal settlers, within these discourses, and the extent to which their voices are included or excluded from disaster management discussions.

3.1 Research Questions

The research is guided by the following questions:

- How do the narratives from government and media sources shape the public's understanding of environmental disasters?
- What role do power dynamics play in shaping the discourse on environmental disasters?
- How are marginalized communities, including women and informal settlers, represented or misrepresented in these disaster-related narratives.

4. Literature Review

The Context of Environmental Disasters in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone is highly susceptible to environmental disasters, with floods and landslides being the most devastating in recent years. The Freetown landslide of August 2017, which claimed over 1,000 lives, is a tragic example of the environmental risks facing the country. The government and international agencies have attributed these disasters to a combination of climate change, deforestation, and rapid urbanization (Binns et al., 2018). However, discourse analysis reveals a more complex set of narratives that reflect underlying power structures, socio-economic inequalities, and governance failures. The increasing prevalence of these disasters in Sierra Leone, such as the devastating 2017 mudslide in Freetown, highlights the country's exposure to environmental hazards exacerbated by poor urban planning, deforestation, and inadequate drainage systems (World Bank, 2017).

The 2017 mudslide, one of the most catastrophic environmental disasters in recent history, claimed numerous lives, displaced many others, and caused extensive infrastructural damage, including the destruction of more than 349 homes (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2017).

Sierra Leone is ranked third among the top 10 countries most vulnerable to climate change, according to the Global Climate Risk Index (2019). Between 1998 and 2017, Sierra Leone experienced 195 climate-related disasters that significantly impacted lives and livelihoods. As of 2020, 42% of Sierra Leone's population lives in urban areas, with many concentrated in informal settlements like Old Wharf and Bomeh, where 80% of the population lacks access to safe housing and basic infrastructure, heightening their vulnerability to disasters (World Bank, 2020).

Research by the Freetown City Council (FCC, 2021) reveals that only 15% of Freetown's urban area has access to properly functioning drainage systems, exacerbating flooding and increasing risks during heavy rains, particularly in low-lying areas such as Bomeh.

The National Disaster Management Agency (NDMA) reported that flooding is the most frequent natural disaster in Sierra Leone, with an estimated 200,000 people affected annually during the rainy season (NDMA, 2023).

The Government of Sierra Leone has implemented various policies and institutional frameworks to address these challenges, emphasizing disaster preparedness, risk management, and climate adaptation. One of the key initiatives is the National Disaster Preparedness and Response Plan (NDPRP), which serves as a comprehensive framework guiding the country's approach to disaster management. The NDPRP integrates activities across the spectrum of preparedness, prevention, mitigation, response, and recovery, focusing on maximizing coordination between the government, NGOs, private sector, and international agencies.

By establishing clear mechanisms for effective resource utilization, inter-agency collaboration, and improved communication during disasters, this plan aims to enhance Sierra Leone's overall resilience to environmental hazards and ensure that public health and safety are prioritized during emergencies in Sierra Leone.

Further strengthening Sierra Leone's disaster management capabilities is the National Disaster Management Agency (NDMA), recognized for its leadership in coordinating disaster response efforts. The NDMA plays a crucial role in managing significant disasters, and collaborates closely with the Office of National Security (ONS) to build national capacities in disaster preparedness. The agency's efforts include capacity building for government officials through practical training and simulation exercises, along with the provision of essential response supplies and equipment. This strategic approach has been instrumental in addressing the complex challenges posed by Sierra Leone's environmental hazards (2021 UN Report).

In addition to national efforts, Sierra Leone has actively engaged with international partners, such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), to bolster disaster preparedness and response initiatives (IOM, 2023). These collaborations focus on enhancing the resilience of vulnerable communities through Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) assessments and tailored training sessions (Government of Sierra Leone, 2022). The government's commitment to these initiatives highlights its recognition of the critical need to strengthen both local and national capacities to manage the recurring environmental disasters effectively (UNDP, 2023).

To further combat the increasing impacts of climate change, the government has developed a National Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (Ministry of Environment, 2021). This strategy addresses the urgent need for adaptive measures to mitigate the effects of climate change, including strengthening early warning systems, promoting sustainable land use practices, and integrating climate risk assessments into broader development planning (Sierra Leone Climate Change Secretariat, 2022). These actions aim to address the root causes of vulnerability, reduce the frequency and severity of environmental disasters, and safeguard Sierra Leone's environmental stability (World Bank, 2023).

The Role of Power in Shaping Disaster Narratives

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) highlights how power relations are deeply embedded in language, influencing the framing of environmental disasters and shaping public understanding (Fairclough, 1995). In Sierra Leone, the discourse surrounding environmental disasters is dominated by government officials, international organizations, and media outlets. These actors play a significant role in constructing narratives that highlight certain causes, solutions, and responsibilities while marginalizing others, often reflecting and reinforcing existing power structures (van Dijk, 1998; Foucault, 1977).

Government Narratives and the Deflection of Responsibility

One of the most striking examples of power relations in the framing of environmental disasters is seen in the aftermath of the Freetown landslide in August 2017. Government officials quickly attributed the disaster to natural causes, describing it as an "act of nature" exacerbated by "illegal" housing in high-risk areas (Njai et al., 2017). By framing the event this way, the government effectively shifted the focus from systemic governance failures—such as poor urban planning and weak enforcement of environmental regulations—to individual responsibility, particularly blaming low-income communities who lived in informal settlements on hillsides.

This framing aligns with a broader pattern in which the government tends to deflect responsibility for environmental mismanagement onto marginalized groups. For example, the deforestation in Freetown's Western Area Peninsula, a key contributor to landslide risk, is often blamed on "illegal logging" by poor communities. However, research shows that much of the deforestation has been driven by commercial logging and real estate development, both of which have powerful political and economic backing (Conteh, 2020). By focusing on the actions of the poor, the government discourse obscures the role of more influential actors and fails to address the structural conditions that create vulnerability.

Furthermore, the government's response to disasters frequently emphasizes short-term solutions such as resettlement and humanitarian aid while avoiding deeper systemic reforms. For instance, following the 2019 flooding in Bo District, the government provided temporary relief but failed to implement long-term measures such as flood-resistant infrastructure or comprehensive land-use planning (Sesay & Kamara, 2020). This reactive approach reinforces a cycle of vulnerability, as communities remain exposed to future disasters without meaningful efforts to address the root causes.

The International Narrative: Climate Change and Its Limitations

International organizations, particularly the United Nations (UN) and the World Bank, also play a significant role in shaping disaster narratives in Sierra Leone. These institutions frequently frame environmental disasters as part of the global climate crisis, emphasizing the need for resilience-building and adaptation strategies. While climate change undoubtedly exacerbates disaster risks, this framing can sometimes oversimplify the issue by overlooking local socio-political dynamics that contribute to vulnerabilities.

For example, in the aftermath of the 2017 landslide, the UN and World Bank reports focused on climate change as a key driver, with less attention given to the local factors that magnified the disaster's impact. These include rapid and unregulated urbanization, corruption in land allocation, and the lack of affordable housing options that force people to settle in hazardous areas (Koroma, 2018). While climate change is a significant factor, this external narrative can overshadow local voices that call for more attention to governance issues, such as land use and planning regulations, which are just as critical in preventing future disasters.

The international focus on resilience and adaptation also subtly shifts responsibility onto local communities, suggesting that they must learn to "adapt" to the realities of climate change. However, this can mask the need for stronger government action and international support in the form of infrastructure development, environmental protection, and disaster preparedness. By framing the solution as one of "building resilience," international organizations risk perpetuating the status quo, where vulnerable populations are expected to bear the brunt of adaptation without addressing the systemic failures that expose them to risks in the first place (Binns et al., 2018).

Marginalized Voices and the Role of Media

The role of media in shaping disaster narratives in Sierra Leone also reflects the power imbalances present in society. Both local and international media often focus on the immediate aftermath of disasters, such as the number of casualties and the scale of destruction, while paying less attention to the underlying causes or long-term recovery efforts. For example, coverage of the Freetown landslide largely centered on the dramatic visuals of the disaster and the subsequent humanitarian response, with little analysis of the governance failures that contributed to the catastrophe (Kamara, 2021). This focus on the sensational aspects of disasters reinforces a view of Sierra Leone as a passive victim of natural forces, rather than highlighting the socio-political factors that exacerbate vulnerability.

Local media, while closer to the ground, often lack the resources to conduct in-depth investigative reporting. As a result, they may rely on official government sources for information, which means they often reproduce the government's narrative. In the case of the 2020 flash floods in Kenema, for example, local news outlets echoed government statements that blamed illegal construction for the flooding, without questioning the role of ineffective flood management systems or the failure to implement early warning systems (Thomas & Fofanah, 2021).

Moreover, the voices of those most affected by disasters—often the poor, women, and rural communities—are frequently marginalized in media coverage. These groups are rarely given a platform to articulate their experiences or suggest alternative narratives that might challenge the dominant discourse. For example, women, who are disproportionately affected by disasters due to their economic and social vulnerabilities, were largely absent from media reports following the Freetown landslide (Koroma, 2018). By excluding these perspectives, the media reinforces the power dynamics that keep marginalized groups at the periphery of disaster narratives.

Local Case Studies: The Tokeh Landslide and Kenema Flooding

Another notable example of how power relations shape disaster narratives can be seen in the 2021 Tokeh landslide in the Western Area Peninsula. The landslide, which destroyed homes and displaced hundreds of people, was initially attributed to heavy rainfall and poor construction practices in informal settlements. However, local NGOs pointed out that much of the deforestation in the area was linked to elite-driven tourism development projects, which cleared large swaths of hillside for luxury resorts (Banda, 2021). Despite this, the official government narrative continued to focus on "illegal" settlements as the primary cause of the disaster, effectively shielding politically connected developers from scrutiny.

Similarly, the 2020 Kenema flooding was framed in official reports as a consequence of climate change and heavy rainfall. While these factors were certainly involved, local civil society groups argued that poor waste management and blocked drainage systems, exacerbated by corruption in local government, played a significant role in the disaster. These groups were largely sidelined in the media coverage, which focused on the scale of

destruction and the government's emergency response, rather than on the structural issues that contributed to the flood (Thomas & Fofanah, 2021).

Language and Responsibility

CDA also looks at how language constructs responsibility in environmental disaster discourses. In Sierra Leone, the language used in government and media reports often assigns blame to certain groups, such as informal settlers, while downplaying the role of state actors and policy shortcomings. For instance, phrases like "illegal construction" or "unsanctioned development" are frequently used to describe the actions of low-income communities living in disaster-prone areas (Sesay, 2020). These terms not only criminalize poverty but also obscure the lack of affordable housing and equitable urban planning, which force many to settle in unsafe areas.

Moreover, the frequent use of passive voice in official reports—such as "buildings were destroyed" or "lives were lost"—tends to depersonalize the tragedy and dilute the responsibility of the state (van Dijk, 1993). This language minimizes the role of governance and systemic neglect, instead portraying the disasters as unavoidable.

In contrast, when international aid agencies discuss environmental disasters in Sierra Leone, there is often an emphasis on resilience and adaptation. Terms like "building resilience" and "community adaptation" are common in reports by organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2018). While these concepts are important, they also imply that communities themselves must take primary responsibility for adapting to climate risks, again diverting attention from the responsibility of governments to implement long-term, sustainable solutions.

Local Media Constraints and Government Narratives

Local media in Sierra Leone, while more connected to the realities on the ground, faces significant challenges that shape how environmental disasters are reported. Constrained by limited resources, many local outlets are unable to conduct the kind of in-depth investigative journalism that would uncover the structural causes of disasters. As a result, they often rely heavily on official government sources for information, which means that their coverage tends to replicate the government's narrative rather than critically examining it (Thomas & Fofanah, 2021).

For example, in the aftermath of the Freetown landslide, local media largely echoed government statements that placed the blame on "illegal settlers" who had built homes in hazardous areas. This narrative not only deflects attention away from the government's failure to enforce building codes and regulate land use, but it also criminalizes the very communities most vulnerable to disaster (Conteh, 2020). Local media's reliance on government sources is further exacerbated by the lack of access to independent experts who could provide alternative perspectives on the causes of environmental disasters.

Moreover, when local media does attempt to critique the government's role in disaster management, it often faces political pressure and censorship. This has been evident in the coverage of disasters such as the 2020 flooding in Kenema, where some outlets that highlighted local governance failures were reportedly threatened with lawsuits or had their licenses revoked (Kamara, 2021). These constraints limit the ability of the local press to hold the government accountable, thereby reinforcing the dominant narrative that shifts responsibility away from the state and onto marginalized communities.

Media Marginalization of Affected Communities

Another critical issue in media representation of environmental disasters in Sierra Leone is the marginalization of the voices of those most affected by these events. Both local and international media often prioritize the perspectives of government officials and international aid organizations over those of local communities. This is particularly evident in the case of women, who are disproportionately affected by environmental disasters due to their socio-economic vulnerabilities but are rarely given a platform to share their experiences (Koroma, 2018).

For example, during the 2017 Freetown landslide, many women lost their homes, livelihoods, and family members, yet their stories were largely absent from the media narrative. Instead, the coverage focused on the broader humanitarian response, with male government officials and representatives from international organizations serving as the primary sources of information (Thomas & Fofanah, 2021). By marginalizing the voices of those most affected by disasters, the media fails to provide a comprehensive understanding of the human impact of these events and overlooks the perspectives of those who could offer valuable insights into how to prevent future disasters.

Similarly, rural communities affected by environmental disasters—such as flooding in Kenema and Pujehun Districts—are often ignored in media coverage, which tends to focus on urban areas like Freetown. This urban bias not only distorts the public's understanding of the geographical scope of disasters but also reinforces the marginalization of rural populations, who are often the most vulnerable to environmental risks due to their isolation and lack of resources (Banda, 2021).

Marginalized Voices in Disaster Discourse

One of the key contributions of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is its focus on marginalized voices—those who are excluded or underrepresented in dominant narratives. In Sierra Leone, the discourse around environmental disasters often overlooks the perspectives of those most affected, including low-income communities living in informal settlements, women, and rural populations. These groups bear the brunt of environmental disasters but are rarely given a platform to articulate their experiences or influence the response and recovery processes. The marginalization of their voices reflects and perpetuates broader socio-political inequalities, as the power to shape disaster narratives remains concentrated among government officials, international organizations, and the media.

Low-Income Communities and Informal Settlements

Low-income communities living in informal settlements, particularly in urban areas like Freetown, are disproportionately affected by environmental disasters such as landslides and flooding. These communities often settle in high-risk areas due to the lack of affordable housing and weak land use regulations, making them highly vulnerable to disasters. Despite this, their voices are typically absent from the public discourse that follows such events. Government and media narratives often portray these communities as responsible for their own vulnerability by focusing on "illegal" housing practices rather than addressing the systemic failures that drive them into hazardous areas (Conteh, 2020).

For example, following the 2017 Freetown landslide, much of the official discourse framed the disaster as a consequence of illegal settlements in the hills surrounding the city. The government blamed residents for building homes in areas known to be prone to landslides, deflecting attention away from the failures in urban planning, housing policy, and environmental protection that contributed to the crisis (Njai et al., 2017). This narrative criminalized poverty and marginalized the very communities most affected by the disaster, as their voices were largely excluded from discussions about recovery and future risk mitigation.

Furthermore, these communities often lack the political clout to influence disaster governance or advocate for more inclusive policies. For instance, in the aftermath of the 2019 flooding in Bo District, informal settlers in the city's low-lying areas were disproportionately affected, but their concerns about inadequate drainage and poor infrastructure were not prioritized in the recovery plans (Sesay & Kamara, 2020). This exclusion reflects the broader socio-economic marginalization of low-income populations in Sierra Leone, whose needs and perspectives are often overlooked in disaster planning and response.

Methodology

The study employs **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)** as the primary methodological framework. CDA focuses on how language is used to construct social realities and reinforce power imbalances. The study analyzes qualitative data from various sources, including government statements, media reports, and NGO publications. By examining these texts, the study reveals how disaster narratives are framed and the implications of these framing for policy and marginalized communities.

Data Sources:

- **Government reports:** It analysed how official narratives frame responsibility for disasters.
- **Media coverage:** It explored how media portray disasters, including who is blamed and whose voices are amplified or marginalized.
- **NGO reports:** It assessed how international and local NGOs contribute to or challenge the dominant disaster narratives.

5. Data Collection

Qualitative data was gathered from multiple sources, including government reports, media articles, and NGO publications. " "Government documents provided insight into official responses to environmental disasters and how responsibility is framed. " "Media coverage was analyzed to understand how the public is informed about these events and the extent to which the media " "shapes or challenges official narratives. Reports from both local

and international NGOs were used to assess the contribution " "of civil society to disaster discourse and to examine alternative narratives that may challenge dominant perspectives.

"Data Analysis

"Through CDA, these texts were analyzed for recurring themes and patterns of language that reflect power relations. Specific attention " "was paid to how marginalized communities, particularly women and informal settlers, are portrayed. The analysis also focused on the " "use of passive and active voice, the attribution of responsibility, and the framing of climate change as a key factor in disaster risk. "The CDA approach is supported by theoretical insights from scholars such as Fairclough (2015), who highlights the role of language in " "maintaining power relations, and Cutter et al. (2003), who emphasize the link between vulnerability and social inequality in the context " "of environmental hazards

6. Findings and Discussions

The findings reveal significant parallels with existing literature on the power dynamics in disaster narratives. For instance, " "Fairclough's (2015) theory of language and power is reflected in how government and media narratives shift responsibility from " "systemic governance failures to marginalized groups, such as informal settlers and women. This deflection of responsibility not " "only diminishes the role of inadequate infrastructure and poor urban planning but also aligns with the findings of Sesay (2020), " "who emphasized the role of urbanization and environmental vulnerability in Sierra Leone.

"Koroma's (2018) analysis of gendered vulnerabilities during the Freetown landslide is also supported by this study's findings. " "Women, particularly those heading households, face additional barriers during disasters, and their exclusion from disaster recovery " "discourse is indicative of broader social inequalities. This exclusion exacerbates their vulnerability and perpetuates a cycle of " "marginalization that is not adequately addressed in official disaster management plans.

"Furthermore, the media's sensational focus on the immediate aftermath of disasters, as highlighted by Chouliaraki (2006), is evident in " "the coverage of the 2017 Freetown landslide. Media reports often emphasized the death toll and destruction, while overlooking deeper " "issues such as weak enforcement of building codes and deforestation, which contributed to the scale of the disaster. The lack of critical " "analysis in media coverage echoes Fairclough's (2015) assertion that media can serve as an instrument of power, shaping public perception " "in ways that reinforce existing social structures.

"In comparing these findings with the existing literature, this study further highlights the need for inclusive disaster governance that " "takes into account the perspectives of marginalized communities. Cutter et al. (2003) emphasize that vulnerability to environmental hazards " "is not just a function of exposure to physical risks but is also shaped by social, economic, and political factors. This study's analysis " "of Sierra Leone's disaster narratives underscores this multidimensional nature of vulnerability and the importance of addressing the root " "causes of inequality in disaster management strategies."

The analysis reveals that the dominant discourse in Sierra Leone's environmental disaster narratives often shifts responsibility away from systemic governance failures and toward marginalized communities. For example, in the aftermath of the 2017 Freetown landslide, the government framed the disaster as a result of informal settlers living in high-risk areas. This narrative deflected attention from the lack of urban planning, deforestation, and poor regulation enforcement, which are major contributing factors to the disaster.

Marginalization of Vulnerable Communities:

The study finds that informal settlers and women are frequently blamed for living in "illegal" or "hazardous" areas, but little attention is given to the socio-economic factors that force them into these situations. Women, in particular, face additional barriers due to gender-based vulnerabilities, yet their voices are rarely included in the disaster management discourse.

The Role of Power in Disaster Narratives:

Power relations are evident in how disaster narratives are constructed. Government officials, international organizations, and media outlets hold significant power in shaping these narratives, often omitting the perspectives of marginalized groups. The language used in official reports often shifts blame onto these groups rather than addressing governance failures such as inadequate infrastructure or poor urban planning.

Women and Gendered Vulnerabilities

The study finds that women in Sierra Leone, particularly those heading households, are among the most vulnerable to environmental disasters due to their social and economic position. Research shows that women are more likely to suffer from the long-term impacts of disasters because they often have fewer resources, less access

to land and property, and greater care-giving responsibilities, which limit their ability to recover (Koroma, 2018). Despite this, women's voices are often missing from public discourse on disaster management, and their specific needs are rarely considered in recovery efforts. For example, women often face barriers to accessing relief aid and rebuilding their homes due to discriminatory land ownership practices and a lack of economic independence. In the case of the Freetown landslide, many women, particularly widows and single mothers, were left out of land redistribution programs aimed at resettling displaced families, as they lacked formal land titles or male relatives to advocate on their behalf (Koroma, 2018). This highlights how gendered vulnerabilities are compounded by socio-economic structures that marginalize women from disaster recovery efforts, leaving them more exposed to future risks.

Moreover, the exclusion of women's voices from disaster planning processes means that gender-sensitive approaches to risk reduction are often overlooked. In many cases, women's unique knowledge and experiences of managing household and community resources in times of crisis are undervalued, despite their potential to contribute to more effective disaster preparedness and recovery strategies (Cutter et al., 2014). The failure to include women in decision-making processes not only perpetuates their vulnerability but also limits the effectiveness of disaster risk management efforts as a whole.

Conclusion

A critical discourse analysis of environmental disasters in Sierra Leone reveals how power, language, and socio-political dynamics shape the narratives surrounding these events. Dominant actors, including the government, international organizations, and the media, often frame disasters in ways that obscure deeper structural causes, deflect responsibility, and marginalize vulnerable populations. By critically examining these discourses, we can better understand the complex interactions between environmental risk, governance, and social inequality in Sierra Leone.

For meaningful progress, it is essential to shift the focus from blaming individuals or attributing disasters solely to climate change and instead address the systemic factors that exacerbate vulnerability. This includes improving urban planning, enforcing environmental regulations, and ensuring that marginalized communities have a voice in disaster management and recovery efforts. The paper concludes that the dominant narratives surrounding environmental disasters in Sierra Leone obscure the root causes of vulnerability. Rather than addressing systemic issues like poor urban planning, weak enforcement of environmental regulations, and deforestation, the focus is often on blaming marginalized communities for living in unsafe areas. The paper advocates for a shift in disaster governance that includes marginalized voices and addresses the structural inequalities that exacerbate disaster risk.

Recommendations

- **Strengthen Urban Planning:** The government should enforce urban planning regulations and environmental policies more effectively to mitigate disaster risks.
- **Community-Based Resilience:** Disaster management strategies should involve local communities in decision-making processes, ensuring that their knowledge and experiences are valued.
- **Inclusive Disaster Governance:** Marginalized groups, particularly women and low-income communities, must be included in disaster planning and response efforts to ensure more equitable and effective policies.

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