

The impact of nomenclature attributed to victims of technological environmental disasters: the case of the Fundão dam collapse

O impacto da nomenclatura atribuída às vítimas de desastres ambientais tecnológicos à luz do rompimento da barragem do Fundão

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Abstract: This study examines the impact of the nomenclature attributed to victims of technological environmental disasters, taking the collapse of the Fundão dam in Mariana, Brazil, as an empirical reference. It discusses how naming practices affect identity construction, rights claims, and processes of recognition in the post-disaster context. Through an analytical and interdisciplinary literature review, the research investigates the multiplicity of terms mobilized to designate both the event and those affected, particularly the categories affected people and disaster victims. It evaluates their adequacy to the examined context and explores their political, communicational, and legal implications. By incorporating a risk communication perspective, the study argues that the selection of specific labels operates as a device of power and a discursive instrument for the symbolic management of the disaster, shaping public perception, institutional narratives, and the legitimization of individuals as victims. The findings indicate that the categories affected persons and internally displaced persons are the most consistent for social and legal recognition. Meanwhile, the notion of internal refugee emerges as a category with significant critical and political potential to convey the gravity of rights violations and processes of deterritorialization. The study concludes that terminological disputes extend beyond semantics; they are communicational and ethical, constituting a central dimension of the power dynamics that define who is heard, who is silenced, and who is recognized.

Keywords: identity; technological environmental disasters; nomenclature; Fundão dam; risk communication.

Resumo: Este estudo analisa o impacto da nomenclatura atribuída às vítimas de desastres ambientais tecnológicos à luz do rompimento da barragem de Fundão em Mariana-MG, discutindo suas repercussões sobre a identidade, direitos e reconhecimento no pós-desastre. Por meio de uma revisão bibliográfica de caráter analítico e interdisciplinar, a pesquisa examina a multiplicidade de termos empregados para citar o evento e as vítimas, sendo os mais utilizados: “impactados” e “atingidos”, apurando quais se aplicam ao contexto investigado e suas implicações políticas, comunicacionais e legais. Ao incorporar a perspectiva da comunicação de riscos, a pesquisa evidencia que a escolha de determinadas nomenclaturas funciona como um dispositivo de poder e um instrumento discursivo de gestão simbólica do evento, moldando a percepção pública, a narrativa institucional e a legitimação das vítimas como vítimas. Os resultados apontam que os termos “atingido” e “deslocado interno” se mostram os mais adequados para o reconhecimento social e jurídico das pessoas afetadas, enquanto o conceito de “refugiado interno” revela-se uma categoria emergente, com grande potencial crítico e político para representar a gravidade das violações de direitos e da desterritorialização impostas. Conclui-se também que a disputa

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terminológica não é apenas semântica, mas comunicacional e ética, sendo parte constitutiva das dinâmicas de poder que definem quem é ouvido, quem é silenciado e quem é reconhecido.

Palavras-chave: identidade; desastres ambientais tecnológicos; nomenclatura; barragem do Fundão; comunicação de riscos.

1. Contextualization of the event and the issue of nomenclature

The collapse¹ of the Fundão dam in Mariana, Minas Gerais, constituted one of the most severe technological environmental² and social disasters in Brazilian history. Beyond the assessment of material damage, however, lies the need to understand how the victims were – and continue to be – named.

From the earliest moments following the collapse, different strategies and narratives were mobilized to classify and define the event, its causes, and, most notably, its victims. The use of terms such as *accident*, *tragedy*, *environmental crime*, and *disaster* reflects ongoing symbolic and legal disputes. Similarly, the designation of directly affected individuals as *impacted* or *affected* has generated conflicts that extend beyond semantics, encompassing power relations, processes of recognition, and the distribution of rights.

This multiplicity of nomenclatures, employed by a range of actors – including the State, responsible corporations, the media, social movements, and academia – has produced a contested political arena, particularly regarding the identity and rights of those affected. While certain labels facilitate the inclusion of victims within legal frameworks of protection and reparation, others restrict such access and obscure the complexity of the

1 As argued within the sociology of disasters by Valêncio et al. (2009), this study adopts the term event to refer to the collapse of the Fundão dam. The cause of the disaster(s), in itself, is not treated as the primary analytical focus; rather, attention is directed toward the internal vulnerability factors of each affected community. This perspective distinguishes the notion of disaster from that of event, the latter being understood as the initial occurrence that triggered subsequent disaster processes – that is, the precipitating cause. By employing the term event, the analysis seeks to emphasize the conceptual dissociation between these categories, indicating that multiple and differentiated disasters may stem from a single occurrence, as observed in the case under examination.

2 The term *technological environmental disaster* refers to events of anthropogenic origin resulting from technical, operational, or managerial failures associated with productive systems and industrial infrastructures, whose consequences extend beyond the physical and material sphere to affect the social, cultural, and symbolic dimensions of the populations involved. Such disasters therefore differ from natural hazards, as they derive from human decisions and development models grounded in the intensive exploitation of natural resources and in the externalization of socio-environmental risks. In the Brazilian context, these events are frequently described as outcomes of institutional omissions and corporate practices that disregard the vulnerability of territories and affected communities, thereby constituting violations of human and environmental rights. Sociological and anthropological scholarship has emphasized that disasters of this nature expose the entanglement between technology, institutional power, and inequality, revealing how political and economic structures determine who bears the risks and who benefits from the profits (Valêncio et al., 2009; Zhouri et al., 2016).

harms experienced. The Fundão dam collapse, therefore, should not be understood solely as an environmental episode, but rather as an ongoing field of political, legal, and symbolic dispute.

Examining these terminologies makes it evident that the adopted nomenclature is not a neutral choice; rather, it operates as a political, legal, and risk communication instrument that directly affects processes of reparation, accountability, and the dignity of those affected. This symbolic dimension of language, when articulated within contexts of environmental injustice and structural inequality, emerges as a key mechanism in the reproduction of vulnerability. For this reason, understanding and critically interrogating the labels that are assigned and circulated becomes essential to any proposal aimed at advancing environmental and social justice in situations involving technological environmental disasters

2. Methodology and Analytical Framework

This study adopted a qualitative, exploratory, and interpretive approach aimed at understanding the identity-related, legal, and political implications of the nomenclatures attributed to victims of technological environmental disasters, with particular emphasis on the Fundão dam event. In parallel, the research sought to identify which terminological designations would be most appropriate in contexts of this nature.

The choice of this approach was grounded in the complexity of the research object, which requires a critical examination of discourses, communications, institutional documents, and regulatory frameworks, articulated with social theories of identity, domination, and justice. Risk communication was incorporated as a cross-cutting analytical lens, considering how institutions frame events such as Fundão and how such framing directly influences the social construction of the categories used to name victims.

The study aimed to assess whether the selection of terms used to refer to victims is restricted to the linguistic domain. It further investigated whether nomenclature constitutes a central element in defining rights, recognition, and legal framing, with direct consequences for access to reparation and accountability. Expressions such as impacted and affected, although often applied to the same individuals, carry distinct implications: while some designations facilitate inclusion within protective legal frameworks, others constrain such access and may even obscure or dehumanize lived suffering.

The methodology relied on documentary analysis and literature review. Sources included the Conduct Adjustment Agreement (TTAC), resolutions issued by the Interfederative Committee (CIF), technical notes, and reports produced by governmental bodies and institutions responsible for remediation. Academic publications, technical studies, expert opinions, and materials produced by civil society organizations engaged with the issue were also considered. These materials were examined through the perspective

of risk communication in order to understand how institutional and media discourses shaped public perceptions of the event and influenced the recognition of victims.

The investigation was guided by an interdisciplinary theoretical-analytical framework drawing on Castells (1999) regarding identity and power, Bauman (2005) on the fluidity of identities in the context of globalization, and Hall (2006) concerning displacement and fragmentation in modern identities. These contributions provided the conceptual basis for interpreting disputes over victim nomenclature as political processes of identity construction or imposition, with tangible implications for rights.

Documentary analysis followed a critical reading strategy that considered the origin, production context, and interests embedded in the materials examined. This approach enabled the identification of terminological recurrences, conceptual ambiguities, and mechanisms of legitimation or exclusion. Theoretical triangulation with the notions of legitimizing identity, resistance identity, and project identity (Castells, 1999) supported the interpretation that different naming practices correspond to distinct power projects, with material consequences for those involved.

Furthermore, a human rights and justice perspective was adopted as an additional analytical lens, expanding the debate beyond semantic considerations to examine how terminology influences the inclusion or exclusion of groups within public policies and reparation mechanisms. To broaden the discussion and address the legal framing of these categories, the analysis was articulated with international normative instruments, including the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (Alto Comissariado das Nações Unidas para Refugiados [ACNUR], 1998) and documents issued by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Organization for Migration.

3. The issue of identity

A designation, category, label, or classification is directly connected to identity, as emphasized by Castells (1999), and is likewise intertwined with the allocation of rights within society. Naming also links individuals to vital dimensions such as belonging, culture, personal attributes, psychosocial profiles, identification, history, self-definition, and distinction. For this reason, identity is equally embedded in the legal domain, particularly within what Schreiber (2014) defines as personality rights.

According to Schreiber (2014), personality rights refer to human attributes that require protection in the private sphere, in addition to constitutional and international safeguards. Identity, therefore, must be understood not only in relation to human dignity but also from the standpoint of subjective rights.

Discussing identity thus requires acknowledging its complex and mul-

tidimensional nature, particularly in contexts marked by vulnerability and rupture, such as the aftermath of the Fundão dam collapse. In such circumstances, the loss of territory and belonging intensifies struggles for recognition and legal protection. The abrupt disruption of everyday worlds imposed profound transformations on those affected, with repercussions that reach their identities in ways that may be as significant as material losses.

From a conceptual perspective, social sciences understand identity as rooted in meanings and lived experience, shaped by environment, history, race, culture, territory, and language (Castells, 1999). Identity is defined as “the process of construction of meaning on the basis of a cultural attribute, or a related set of cultural attributes, that is given priority over other sources of meaning” (Castells, 1999, p. 22).

Identity both situates individuals within collectivities and differentiates them, organizing meaning into a unique and indivisible configuration. It is continuous, fragile, and essential, grounded in cultural and social origins and operating as a marker of belonging and legitimacy.

Castells (1999) argues that identity is built from elements such as history, geography, biology, institutions, collective memory, religiosity, and power relations, all of which are constantly reinterpreted by individuals and groups across time and context. In this sense, identity is relational, contextual, and fluid. It is through interaction and social relations that individuals define themselves and others, and this constructed nature does not diminish authenticity; rather, it underscores identity as a process of transformation shaped by experience and circumstance.

When addressing identity formation, Castells (1999) distinguishes between individual identity and social roles. While identity is produced by the subject, roles are imposed by institutions. These socially structured positions may be accepted or tacitly incorporated, yet they remain distinct from the identity constructed by the individual, which is singular. Roles organize functions temporarily, whereas identity expresses deeper processes of meaning-making.

The author further identifies three modes of identity construction: legitimizing identity, promoted by dominant institutions seeking to reinforce their authority; resistance identity, which emerges in response to oppression and stigmatization and serves as a resource for survival and mobilization; and project identity, developed by social actors who seek to redefine their position and transform their social condition, often collectively.

Such trajectories are legitimate and context-dependent, varying according to power arrangements and institutional configurations. From this standpoint, what occurs is not the disappearance of identity, but the reconfiguration of networks of meaning (Castells, 1999).

Within this framework, globalization and social transformation become central analytical dimensions. Bauman (2005) argues that identity is shaped by instability in the globalized environment. Under conditions

of constant change, identity becomes more volatile and demands ongoing efforts toward stabilization. As identities transform, they absorb elements from others, sometimes leading to the irreversible erosion of prior specificities. Globalization thus contributes to displacement and fragmentation.

This crisis of identity is intensified by the weakening of traditional reference points and by processes of cultural homogenization. The tension between global uniformity and the affirmation of difference produces unstable and fragmented subjectivities, as highlighted by Hall (2006). Bauman (2005) synthesizes this condition through the metaphor of “liquid modernity”, in which certainties dissolve and identity must be continually reconstructed.

Returning to Castells (1999), identity has historically been shaped by systems of domination, a process closely aligned with legitimizing identity. Over time, phenomena such as migration, exclusion, and xenophobia have stimulated nationalist responses grounded in identity crises, consolidating identity as a key category for understanding displacement and mobility. From this perspective, Medeiros (2008) emphasizes that memory, culture, belonging, and collectivity must remain central when recognition is at stake.

The search for identification – whether imposed, negotiated, or self-produced – therefore remains unavoidable. Even within a global, networked, fluid, and unstable modernity, identity persists as a criterion of social and legal legitimacy, as it helps determine access to rights. Identity, category, and nomenclature thus form a crucial semantic field deeply intertwined with recognition and belonging. As Castells (1999) suggests, in contexts marked by recurrent denial of rights, discussing identity is not merely conceptual; it is an ethical and political imperative. Ultimately, it concerns the fundamental right to exist with dignity.

4. Naming Victims After the Fundão Dam Event

In the period that followed the event, victims were designated in multiple ways across official documents, academic publications, and the media – an issue that, according to Mazzola (2018), is central to the present analysis.

Different classifications were attributed to the Fundão dam collapse. The event was widely portrayed in the media as the ‘Mariana disaster,’ the ‘Mariana tragedy,’ an ‘environmental crime,’ a ‘catastrophe,’ and an ‘accident.’ Sometimes treated as synonyms, the choice of one term over another carries implications for stakeholder management and for how crises are handled (Mazzola, 2018, p. 164).

Depending on the term adopted, approaches to accountability, crisis management, and institutional response also changed.

[...] across multiple documents related to the Fundão collapse (news reports, academic articles, books, and reports), these terms are used sometimes as synonyms

and sometimes according to their specific denotations; additional terms also appear, such as ‘incident,’ ‘tragedy,’ ‘drama,’ ‘catastrophe,’ or even ‘fatality’ (Mazzola, 2018, p. 170).

In the Conduct Adjustment Agreement (TTAC), signed in the context of the Fundão dam event to establish measures of reparation, compensation, and mitigation of socio-environmental damages, the term “impacted” appears nearly 100 times. By contrast, the term “affected” (“*atingido*”) appears only a few times, such as in the annex to Clause 141, in a supplementary technical note.

IMPACTED: individuals or legal entities, and their respective communities, who were directly affected by the EVENT under the terms of the items below and of this AGREEMENT: (a) loss of a spouse/partner or family members up to the second degree due to death or disappearance; (b) loss, due to death or disappearance, of relatives of other degrees or persons with whom they cohabited and/or maintained a relationship of economic dependence; (c) loss, duly evidenced by the owner, of movable or immovable property, or loss of possession of immovable property; (d) loss of productive capacity or of the feasibility of using an immovable property or part thereof; (e) evidenced loss of fishing areas and of fishing/extractive resources, rendering extractive or productive activity unviable; (f) loss of income sources, employment, or means of subsistence on which they depend economically, due to disruption of ties with affected areas; (g) evidenced harm to local productive activities, making an establishment or economic activities unviable; (h) unviability of access to, or management activity of, natural and fishing resources, including public lands and collectively used areas, affecting income, subsistence, and the way of life of riverside, estuarine, traditional communities, and Indigenous peoples; (i) harm to physical or mental health; and (j) destruction of, or interference with, community ways of life or conditions for the reproduction of sociocultural and cosmological processes of riverside, estuarine, traditional populations, and Indigenous peoples (Fundação Renova, 2016, p. 7).

INDIRECTLY IMPACTED: individuals and legal entities, present or future, who do not fall under the previous items, who reside or will reside within the AREA OF COVERAGE and who experience limitations in the exercise of their rights due to the environmental or economic consequences – direct or indirect, present or future – of the EVENT. These persons will be granted access to information and participation in community discussions and may also access public facilities resulting from the PROGRAMS (Fundação Renova, 2016, p. 8).

The TTAC recognized that some victims lost their productive capacity entirely and that they should participate in all decisions regarding remediation – an expectation that, according to Câmara et al. (2019), did not materialize.

The SOCIOECONOMIC PROJECTS shall seek to establish and provide efficient and timely benefits to the IMPACTED, prioritizing IMPACTED persons who experienced displacement or who lost productive capacity entirely and who meet

the criteria set forth in this Agreement, without prejudice to emergency measures already underway [...] (Fundação Renova, 2016, p. 18).

Participation in the PROGRAMS is understood as the possibility for the IMPACTED to effectively participate, be heard, and influence all stages and phases arising from this Agreement, both in the planning phase and in the actual implementation of the programs and actions referred to herein; such participation shall be ensured collectively, following methodologies that allow expression and individual participation, under the terms of this Agreement (Fundação Renova, 2016, p. 28).

In her study, Terra (2022) cites the account of a representative of the Movimento dos Atingidos por Barragens (MAB), who rejects the term “impacted”, arguing that “impact” is a concept rooted in physics rather than sociology. Because the event entailed social dimensions that cannot be disregarded, “impacted” would not be an adequate designation. The representative recommended the terms “damage” and “affected”, noting that “impact” may be interpreted as either negative or positive, which could contribute to minimizing consequences and diluting responsibility (Terra, 2022).

The interviewee further argued that Fundação Renova³, under the influence of the mining companies’ interests – strategically trained its staff to adopt the label “impacted”. According to this account, the victims were designated through a unilateral decision embedded in the TTAC (i.e., by Renova), and the dispute over nomenclature should be understood as a political conflict: an attempt to technicize a fundamentally social issue, thereby dehumanizing it and weakening accountability (Terra, 2022).

With respect to the TTAC, only three instances of the term “affected” (“*atingido*”) were identified in the entire document, specifically in a Joint Technical Note. It is worth noting that the term “affected” tends to be more acceptable among those impacted by the event, as indicated in the testimony summarized above.

The governance model proposed by the public authorities was described as a way to combine speed of implementation (a private-law foundation), enforcement of corporate responsibilities (recognized under the Agreement and operationalized through the Foundation as the instrument for designing, implementing, and monitoring recovery and compensation actions), safeguarding the public interest (through validation by public authorities via an Interfederative Committee, without prejudice to competent agencies), and transparency and social participation (through multiple provisions in the Agreement, including a Consultative Council, participation of affected persons in the Committee, dissemination of implementation information, and guarantees of negotiation with affected persons, among others) (Fundação Renova, 2016, p. 130).

3 The Renova Foundation is an entity created by Samarco, Vale, and BHP Billiton to manage and implement reparation and compensation measures for the damages caused by the collapse of the Fundão dam, in Mariana (MG), in 2015.

Regarding the two terms in question – “impacted” and “affected” – Terra (2022) clearly preferred the use of “affected” and developed a broader discussion around its implications.

After the Mariana disaster, the companies responsible for the harm were tasked with the emergency registration of affected persons. Under the TTAC (Clause 19), this responsibility was transferred to Fundação Renova (through the Integrated Registry) and became part of a program titled the “Program for surveying and registering the IMPACTED”, to be completed within eight months of the Agreement’s signature. One consequence of assigning registration to the corporations responsible for the harm and to a foundation created by them to implement reparation and compensation measures was the concentration of power to officially define who counts as “affected” – and, consequently, who would be entitled to financial assistance and potential compensation – without providing space for individuals to formulate their own identity as “affected” or to understand themselves as part of that collective (Terra, 2022, p. 122).

Terra (2022) argued that “impacted” technicizes and dehumanizes processes of destruction and injustice. The reluctance of Renova staff to adopt alternative nomenclatures was framed as strategic and as the outcome of organizational training. The “category ‘affected’”, the author emphasized, “is a contested concept, because it implies recognition – that is, the legitimization – of rights” (Terra, 2022, p. 121). From this standpoint, there appears to be an attempt to reduce the perceived magnitude of harm through a euphemistic framing that directly intersects with access to rights and with the identity of those affected (Terra, 2022).

The Mediation Compensation Program (PIM) directly shapes the formulation of affected identity as a political category. Unsurprisingly, there is an ongoing dispute over the meaning of affected and over the most appropriate category to refer to those who suffered harm as a result of the event. While the corporations responsible for the damage use the label “impacted” – often echoed in governmental discourse – social movements employ the term affected persons, particularly the Movement of People Affected by Dams (MAB), which has long struggled for the recognition of this category (Terra, 2022).

This semantic controversy gained such prominence that, in 2018, the Interfederative Committee (CIF) formally endorsed the debate and supported discontinuing the term “impacted” in favor of affected (Comitê Interfederativo [CIF], 2018). Nevertheless, as Terra (2022) notes, after repeated circulation over the three years preceding the demand regarding nomenclature, “impacted” had already penetrated collective consciousness and blurred popular understandings.

Although the arguments above favor the use of affected rather than “impacted”, Benincá (2011) disagrees, arguing that affected is not an ideal term because harms may range from mild to severe. The author further

notes that a person may be “affected” in a positive or negative way, superficially or deeply.

This line of reasoning reveals a parallel with the semantic problem surrounding “impacted”, as discussed earlier. After all, the notion derived from “impact” can likewise be construed as positive or negative, mild or profound.

Vainer (2007) contributes to the debate by arguing that the concept of affected has undergone semantic expansion that is directly related to the evolution of the human rights framework. The author nonetheless acknowledges limitations in its use. The term itself triggers disputes over recognition and the legitimization – or denial – of rights. Accordingly, affected should be understood within a broader context of struggles for rights and for recognition as a collective that has been harmed. Conceptual precision is therefore a preliminary and central element in rights claims, making the selection of terminology vital for securing guarantees (Vainer, 2007).

Vainer (2007) further observes that, from both sociological and anthropological perspectives, the meaning attributed to affected varies substantially across regional contexts. Reactions among those harmed are not uniform, and the term cannot be assumed to carry the same meaning across settings. The concept is not homogeneous; however, the main issue is not the absence of clear concepts, but rather the resistance of corporate actors to relinquish commonly used labels, given that corporate responses tend to focus narrowly on compensation.

Despite the multiple critiques surrounding the semantic debate on affected, it is essential to recognize the historical relevance of the movement of people affected by dams in Brazil when examining this nomenclature. This movement has supported and defended the term as a designation already consolidated through struggles for rights. In Brazil, affected has become a political category over time, established through prolonged and difficult efforts toward reparation and recognition – struggles and achievements that cannot be rendered invisible.

Whereas in the past being recognized as affected tended to entail reparation and compensation primarily for landowners located near hydroelectric projects, multiple groups commonly classified as traditional populations – such as riverside communities, extractivists, *geraizeiros*, fishers, Pantanal communities, *caiçaras*, and *quilombola* communities – began organizing to secure recognition and reparation for harms linked to such developments. Over time, these efforts have produced incremental gains that are closely associated with, and legitimized through, the political use of the term affected. In this sense, the relevance of adopting the term is difficult to contest (Vainer, 2007; Benincá, 2011).

The debate over affected is also addressed by Silveira (2021) and Gomide et al. (2018), who problematize the multiple categories created to designate subjects harmed by mining enterprises and by technological environmental disasters. Within these perspectives, affected persons are understood

as a new social category arising from the convergence of rights violations, forced displacement, and political struggles for recognition. The term thus exceeds a purely descriptive designation of material loss and acquires political and identity-related meanings that emerge from mobilization and disputes over legitimacy.

Silveira (2021) further emphasizes that the term *affected* carries the mark of a shared historical experience linked to the Latin American expansion of neo-extractivism. Naming someone as *affected* recognizes not only experienced suffering, but also an ongoing process of rights denial and institutional silencing that characterizes these contested territories. The term synthesizes a position of resistance and claims-making, functioning as a symbolic and political device of denunciation, which reinforces its relevance within the field of environmental justice.

When examining other nomenclatures in circulation, several official bodies employ shifting and distinct terms to refer to the event, among which the term “*accident*” stands out given its repeated use in the referenced materials. Mazzola (2018) argues that the strategic deployment of certain labels when referring to the event and its victims is consequential. In the author’s view, each publication selects terms that best serve its intended argumentative framing – what Valêncio et al. (2009) describes as the *strategic use of information*.

As published by the Minas Gerais State Environmental Foundation (FEAM), for instance, the event is referred to using both “*disaster*” and “*accident*”, as if the terms were interchangeable.

It should be noted that the effects of the environmental impacts resulting from the disaster are still present, which calls for the adoption of several complementary measures aimed at their reduction and mitigation, by both the company and federal, state, and municipal public agencies and entities (Fundação Estadual do Meio Ambiente [FEAM], 2016, p. 34).

Due to the experience acquired with the SAMARCO accident in 2015, a Task Force was established and, as a result, a draft decree was proposed calling on those responsible for tailings containment dams with upstream raising to undergo an Extraordinary Technical Safety Audit (FEAM, 2016, p. 45).

The Brazilian Committee on Dams (CBDB) likewise uses the term *accident*, describing it as tragic and severe. It is noteworthy that the CBDB’s role vis-à-vis the Brazilian mining sector is to promote the development, application, and dissemination of technologies and practices in support of dam engineering and related works in Brazil (Comitê Brasileiro de Barragens [CBDB], [n.d.]).

The National Water and Basic Sanitation Agency (ANA) also refers to the event as an accident, naming its consequences as socioeconomic impact and environmental impact:

2015 was marked by the largest dam accident ever recorded in the country in terms of socioeconomic impacts: the collapse of the Fundão dam, owned by Samarco S/A, in Mariana/MG, which caused the deaths of 19 people and generated a major environmental impact across the entire Rio Doce basin (Agência Nacional de Águas e Saneamento Básico [ANA], 2016, p. 10).

Mazzola (2018) challenges the use of “*accident*” and prefers “*disaster*”. It is important to emphasize that, in this framing, the preferred term for what occurred in Mariana is *disaster*, given that it encompasses human, social, and environmental harms observed in the affected region. Nonetheless, terms such as “*accident*” and “*environmental crime*” also appear, depending on the perspective adopted (Mazzola, 2018).

Within disaster sociology, it is emphasized that a single event may generate multiple disasters of different natures and intensities. Valêncio et al. (2009) argues that analytical emphasis should not fall exclusively on the initial triggering cause, but also on pre-existing vulnerability factors within each affected community.

This perspective draws a clear distinction between *event* and *disaster*: the *event* denotes the precipitating occurrence, whereas the *disaster* is constituted through its social, economic, and institutional effects, mediated by contexts of inequality and structural fragility. Thus, according to the author, the Fundão event did not produce a single disaster, but rather initiated a series of interconnected disasters unfolding across distinct dimensions of collective life.

Valêncio et al. (2009) further argues that, when employing the term *disaster*, the more accurate formulation would be *technological environmental disaster*, suggesting that such disasters are structurally linked to neo-extractivist operations. In general terms, these operations involve human intervention in ways that implicate action, intention, error, and/or negligence (Zhou et al., 2016).

In the case of Samarco (Vale/BHP Billiton), the risks of a possible collapse – and the measures that should have been taken to prevent it – were reportedly already known to environmental authorities prior to the event. A forensic assessment commissioned by the Minas Gerais Public Prosecutor’s Office indicated that the Pristino Institute had warned, as early as 2013, of the risk of dam collapse. The report recommended periodic geotechnical and structural monitoring of the dikes and dam, and underscored the need for a contingency plan for risk situations or accidents. Zhou et al. (2016) argue that one possible implication of framing choices is the diffusion of a discourse that reclassifies corporate practices toward affected persons as “support” or “solidarity” directed at the community – voluntary and charitable action increasingly detached from corporate responsibility for reparations. In this view, how a disaster’s causal factor is qualified is closely tied to strategies of producing and reversing meanings in favor of dominant positions at stake (Zhou et al., 2016, p. 37).

In a similar line of reasoning and through the lens of risk communica-

tion, given the strategic use of certain terms when referring to the event, one may cite a statement delivered during the second public hearing on 7 December 2017 in Mariana, convened to debate the corrective operational licensing process for the Germano Complex. The hearing was livestreamed, and it was evident that the leadership of the Rural Producers' Union of Mariana supported the resumption of corporate operations in the region, which subsequently occurred. At the end of the statement, the speaker remarked that “[...] accidents, like what happened in Mariana, happen” (Samarco Mineração, 2017).

However, it is not possible to determine whether this statement should be interpreted as a strategic use of information aimed at shaping common sense, or as an expression of a more entrenched social blindness related to historically imposed local dependency on neo-extractivist operations.

Mazzola (2018) discusses official definitions of accident and incident – both set out in Resolution No. 144 of 10 July 2012 (Agência Nacional de Aviação Civil [ANAC], 2012), which regulates the classification and treatment of occurrences within the field of operational safety. In the same study, the author includes photographs of protest messages displayed during a public hearing held on 5 October 2017 involving the Minas Gerais Public Prosecutor's Office, victims, and Samarco's legal representatives; among other statements, protestors declared: “It was not an ‘accident’!

Labeling the Fundão collapse an “*accident*”, even if technically or semantically defensible, subtly distances the notion of foreseeability or causal linkage between human decisions and ensuing outcomes. By contrast, the term “*disaster*” foregrounds the human dimension, particularly regarding *affected persons* and the physical, material, and psychological harms experienced. This helps explain why Samarco reportedly avoided referring to the collapse and its consequences as a “*disaster*” in institutional communications, sustainability reporting, or in the investigation report conducted by the U.S. law firm Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton LLP, contracted by Samarco. More forceful than either “*disaster*” or “*accident*” is the characterization of the event as a “*crime*”. In legal framing, what occurred in Mariana has predominantly been classified as an *environmental crime*. Law No. 9,605/1998 governs environmental crimes – those causing damage to the environment in its various forms, including offenses against fauna, flora, qualified pollution, and harms to urban planning and cultural heritage (*Lei nº 9.605*, 1998). For the Federal Police and the Civil Police of Minas Gerais, the evidence collected indicated that what occurred in Mariana in 2015 constituted an environmental crime (Mazzola, 2018, p. 166).

Within academia, one also finds studies and publications that converge in terms of context and accountability, yet adopt divergent terminologies.

Terms such as *refugee*⁴ and *displacement* appear in references to victims, with the latter often derived from the label *displaced*⁵.

Regarding forced displacement – within which internally displaced persons (IDPs) constitute a subcategory – UNHCR provides a definition in the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement⁵ (PORDI) (ACNUR, 1998). Among other elements, IDPs are defined as persons who have been compelled to move within the borders of their own country, a process that may also involve violations of human rights. UNHCR includes both natural and human-made calamities among the drivers that may result in internal displacement (UNHCR, 1998, p. 1).

Internally displaced persons are individuals or groups of individuals who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights, or human-made or natural disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border (ACNUR, 1998, p. 1).

Although the Guiding Principles provide a definition, UNHCR also notes that internal displacement does not rely on a single binding legal instrument equivalent to the 1951 Refugee Convention. IDPs thus remain, as a legal matter, under the protection of their own State – even when that State is implicated in the conditions producing displacement or appears negligent.

Persons displaced within their own country for reasons similar to those of refugees, but who have not crossed an international border. Although they have been forced to leave their homes for causes akin to those affecting refugees (persecution, armed conflict, generalized violence, or serious and widespread violations of human rights), internally displaced persons remain legally under the protection of their own State – even when that State is the cause of their flight. [...] As citizens, they must be protected by their countries and their rights are guaranteed under international human rights and humanitarian law. Civilians affected by natural disasters may also be considered internally displaced persons (ACNUR, 2022a, p. 28).

4 Although some studies have employed the term *refugees* to describe those affected by the Fundão dam collapse (Silva et al., 2017), the use of this designation should be treated with caution. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), refugees are individuals who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, or as a result of serious human rights violations, are compelled to seek protection outside their country of origin. In the Fundão case, although affected persons experienced severe violations of fundamental rights and forced displacement, these processes took place within national borders, which precludes their legal classification as refugees. Therefore, even when used metaphorically, the term is not conceptually appropriate, as it risks obscuring the specific nature of internal displacement arising from technological environmental disasters in Brazil (ACNUR, 2022b).

5 The document *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement* has played an important role in disseminating the understanding of the term *internally displaced person*, as it has contributed to the development of related legislation in several countries (Pacífico et al., 2020).

While the term refugee is aligned with the notion of cross-border forced displacement, that is, international in scope, the category of internally displaced person is defined by the limitation imposed by national borders, referring to what is known as internal forced displacement. Such individuals require protection just as refugees do; however, they remain legally under the responsibility of their own State simply because they have not crossed an internationally recognized frontier. According to the definition, whether this State is itself responsible for the displacement or not is not a determining factor in classifying the migrant category⁶ in question.

Internally displaced person (IDP): a person or group of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights, or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border (Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, UN Doc. E/CN.4/1998/53/Add.2) (Organização Internacional para as Migrações [OIM], 2009, p. 54).

As observed, both *refugees* and *internally displaced persons* constitute categories within the broader framework of forced migration, differing primarily with regard to the geographical scope of displacement. This scope determines the protection regime to be applied: cross-border forced displacement falls under the mandate of the international refugee protection system, whereas internal displacement formally remains under the responsibility of the State of origin. Nevertheless, an important intersection unites these categories – namely, the occurrence of human rights violations, which lies at the core of the United Nations’ humanitarian mandate.

Given the recurrent historical failures of many States to ensure pro-

6 Although the international literature establishes conceptual distinctions among *migrant*, *refugee*, *forced migrant*, and *internally displaced person*, it is essential to situate these categories in relation to the context of those affected by the Fundão collapse. Migration broadly refers to any population movement within or across national borders, whether temporary or permanent, driven by economic, political, cultural, religious, environmental reasons, or coercion (OIM, 2009, p. 40). The term *migrant* therefore encompasses any individual who leaves their habitual residence, either internally or internationally, for a variety of motives (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2022). Forced migration, in turn, is defined by the presence of coercion or threats to life and survival, and may result from natural causes or human actions, including environmental, chemical, technological disasters, or large-scale development projects (OIM, 2009, p. 41). In this sense, both refugees and internally displaced persons are understood as forced migrants and, as such, victims of human rights violations. Thus, although those affected by the Fundão event cannot be legally recognized as refugees, since they did not cross international borders as required by the UNHCR definition, they may be conceptually framed as internally forced migrants, given that they were compelled to move as a result of a technological disaster that entailed serious violations of fundamental rights. This distinction is significant because the absence of precise legal classification prevents these populations from accessing international protection mechanisms and specific public policies for redress, thereby contributing to the invisibilization and weakening of their political and juridical standing as rights-bearing subjects.

tection and safeguard the rights of their own affected populations, as illustrated in the case examined here, UNHCR has, in specific situations, extended assistance to internally displaced persons. This practice helps explain why such terms are sometimes used interchangeably, albeit imprecisely, including within academic debates and even within the United Nations system itself.

With the expansion of mandates authorized by the United Nations General Assembly to address internal displacement – particularly in contexts where national authorities are unwilling or unable to provide adequate protection – it is evident that the issue has progressively gained prominence. In this regard, the establishment of the *Cluster Approach*⁷ may be interpreted as a cautious step toward elevating internal displacement on the international agenda, potentially opening space for conceptual revision or normative expansion. In practice, a degree of operational flexibility has already been observed.

Because many States lack the institutional capacity to adequately support internally displaced populations, non-governmental organizations frequently become overburdened. UNHCR itself increasingly assumes leadership in responding to demands that would, in principle, fall within domestic jurisdiction. After all, whether displacement occurs across or within borders, affected individuals experience violations of human rights, which remain central to the agency's mission. Yet, despite its involvement in internal displacement since 1991 under exceptional circumstances, UNHCR continues to employ the designation “*non-refugee humanitarian emergencies*” within the Cluster framework, perhaps as a way of underscoring that such engagement lies beyond its formal legal mandate, traditionally restricted to refugees.

The New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, adopted in 2016 by all United Nations Member States, likewise acknowledges the necessity of extending support to internally displaced persons in ways comparable to refugees. Notably, the very title of the declaration explicitly mentions both categories, recognizing their distinction while simultaneously placing them on an equivalent plane of political and moral relevance. Increasingly, the

7 The Cluster Approach is a humanitarian coordination mechanism adopted within the United Nations system and formalized in 2005 with the objective of organizing and enhancing the effectiveness of international responses to complex humanitarian emergencies. The model structures humanitarian action into thematic clusters – such as shelter, health, water and sanitation, and protection – each led by a designated agency, under the overall coordination of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Originally designed for contexts of armed conflict and large-scale disasters, the approach has progressively been mobilized and adapted to other crisis settings. This expansion has generated debate regarding the conceptual broadening of what constitutes a humanitarian emergency and the increasing flexibility in the criteria governing its activation within the framework of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2026).

fact of having crossed – or not crossed – international borders appears to be losing centrality in humanitarian and legal debates.

In the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, we pledged that no one would be left behind. [...] We reaffirm today our commitments that relate to the specific needs of migrants or refugees. The 2030 Agenda makes clear, inter alia, that we will facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies. The needs of refugees, internally displaced persons and migrants are explicitly recognized [...] (UNHCR, 2016, p. 3).

We recognize the very large number of people who are displaced within national borders and the possibility that such persons might seek protection and assistance in other countries as refugees or migrants. We note the need for reflection on effective strategies to ensure adequate protection and assistance for internally displaced persons and to prevent and reduce such displacement [...] (UNHCR, 2016, p. 4).

We will assist, impartially and on the basis of needs, migrants in countries that are experiencing conflicts or natural disasters, working, as applicable, in coordination with the relevant national authorities (UNHCR, 2016, p. 10).

Other sources likewise acknowledge discrepancies in the use of such terminology. On the official website of the United Nations Refugee Agency, for instance, the first frequently asked question addresses precisely the distinction between refugees and migrants: “*Are the terms ‘refugee’ and ‘migrant’ interchangeable?*” The United Nations makes it clear that these are fundamentally different legal and conceptual categories; nevertheless, they are often incorrectly employed as synonyms in public and media discourse.

Are the terms ‘refugee’ and ‘migrant’ interchangeable?

No. Although it is becoming increasingly common to see the terms ‘refugee’ and ‘migrant’ used interchangeably in media and public discussions, there is a crucial legal difference between the two. Confusing them can lead to problems for refugees and asylum-seekers, and for States seeking to respond to mixed movements, as well as to misunderstandings in discussions of asylum and migration (UNHCR, 2023, p. 1).

Turton (2003) argues that the distinction between refugees and internally displaced persons is neither clear nor rigid. Because humanitarian responses tend to prioritize urgent political and operational concerns, the issue becomes far less conceptual than practical. From this perspective, he suggests that the term “internal refugee” would be more appropriate in national contexts where no international border has been crossed, yet serious violations of human rights have occurred.

[...] it would be logical and understandable to prefer the term ‘internal refugees’ [refugiados internos] to ‘internally displaced persons’ [deslocados internos]. This would both recognise the ‘refugee-like’ situation of the people being referred to and make clear the distinction between them and forced resettlers [reassentamentos

forçados], who are also displaced within their own countries but who are not in a 'refugee-like' situation. As noted earlier, however, the logic which dictates the use of 'internally displaced persons' rather than 'internal refugee' is a practical, not a conceptual one: it has to do with a concern not to undermine the protection available to refugees under the 1951 Convention, which makes 'alienage' an 'essential element' of the legal definition of a refugee [as affirms Hathaway (1991)] (Turton, 2003, p. 16).

Turton (2003) also addresses the question of appropriate terminology in situations of natural disasters, which this study understands as encompassing environmental events as well. The term *internal refugee* would also be the most suitable in such cases, since these individuals fall within what he calls *other forced migrants*, that is, a category that could potentially be incorporated into the broader framework of forced migration. Because such disasters compel victims into forced resettlement – even when displacement results from large-scale projects justified in the name of public interest – the author argues that these circumstances evoke a condition analogous to refuge

[...] the form of words used to justify the inclusion of those displaced by 'natural disasters' ['internal refugees'] could be used to extend the definition to many if not most of today's forced resettlers [reassentamentos forçados], even though they are not mentioned in the definition. [...] all humans have a right to be protected from 'arbitrary displacement', including cases of 'large scale development projects, which are not justified by compelling and overriding public interests [...] the categories 'refugee' and 'internal displaced person' are unhelpful when it comes to the observation, description and analysis of empirical data, of the world as it actually is (Turton, 2003, p. 16).

By arguing that the category of internally displaced persons is too imprecise to be consistently applied, Turton (2003) reinforces the view that there is no unanimity, stable definition, or coherence in the terminology surrounding forced migration. Significant limitations persist within international legal frameworks, creating obstacles that hinder internally displaced persons from accessing the protection and assistance they require.

5. The impact of diverse nomenclatures on identity

The collapse of the Fundão dam, in addition to causing immeasurable material and environmental damage, triggered a process of identity disruption among affected subjects. The struggle for survival amid the loss of territories, community ties, and everyday references was accompanied by a profound crisis of belonging. As Castells (1999) notes, identity is not merely a subjective construction but a relational process that defines an individual's place in society; in this case, that place was abruptly fractured.

From the earliest post-disaster moments, a multiplicity of terms began

to be employed to designate the victims. Far from representing simple semantic variations, these labels carry concrete consequences for access to rights, institutional recognition, and the ways individuals perceive themselves socially. The absence of a clear and legitimate definition not only contributed to the precarization of reparation but also produced a symbolic vacuum surrounding the identity of those affected, keeping them in a condition of indeterminacy and vulnerability.

The imposition of the term “impacted” by the Renova Foundation, without consultation with the victims or dialogue with social movements, exemplifies what Castells (1999) defines as a “legitimizing identity”, one imposed by institutions of power in order to organize and control subjects’ social experience. This constitutes an attempt to technify pain and suffering, dehumanizing lived experience and subordinating victims’ identities to corporate interests. By reducing historical subjects to operational categories, space for recognition and agency is effectively eliminated.

This process was intensified by the fact that the company responsible for the disaster was also entrusted with defining who would be considered eligible for reparation. According to Terra (2022), by delegating to Renova the authority to classify, register, and recognize victims, an asymmetrical governance model was consolidated, reproducing exclusion through administrative means. This dynamic resulted not only in the denial of rights but also in the symbolic erasure of victimhood for many individuals.

The reaction of those affected – who reject the label “impacted” and instead claim the designation “affected” – may therefore be interpreted as a form of identity resistance (Castells, 1999). This resistance materializes, for instance, in communicative practices created by the victims themselves, such as the newspaper *A Sirene*⁸, which emerged as a collective strategy to reconstruct memory, belonging, and identity, being produced and written by the affected communities (Lobato, 2018).

According to Santos (2022), *A Sirene* constitutes a space of “structure of feeling” among the affected, where collective pain, indignation, and hope are expressed. An examination of its editions reveals that the refusal of the word “impacted” is not merely semantic but also ethical and political, since the term “affected” conveys recognition of injustice, harm, and the struggle for rights.

In this sense, the newspaper’s publications contribute to consolidating a search for resistance identity (Castells, 1999), demonstrating how community communication can operate as a tool of social emancipation against discursive hegemony (Zhou et al., 2016; Santos, 2022).

8 The newspaper *A Sirene* was created in 2016 by people affected by the collapse of the Fundão dam, in partnership with students from the Federal University of Ouro Preto and social movements such as the MAB. Its purpose was to develop an independent form of communication produced “by and for the affected”, aimed at reconstructing memories and identities in the face of institutional silencing (Lobato, 2018).

Faced with an institutional attempt at categorical imposition, mobilizations emerged seeking to reclaim autonomy over self-definition. This resistance also responds to the institutional delegitimization of victims' narratives, which requires them to provide "technical proof" of their suffering in order for it to be acknowledged – a process that Zhou et al. (2016) describe as "metric suffering".

Such social suffering is intensified by the technocratic logic of reparation. When lived pain is validated only through reports, diagnoses, or expert assessments, an environment of symbolic and moral delegitimization is created. According to Zhou et al. (2016), this approach not only marginalizes victims but also reinforces the position of institutions and corporations as supposedly neutral mediators, obscuring their responsibilities and further weakening prospects for overcoming collective trauma.

Moreover, the identity crisis produced by these processes extends beyond the absence of effective reparation policies; it reveals a symbolic struggle for the right to exist as a recognized subject. How can one occupy a place in the world without a socially validated identity? The answer, suggested by Castells (1999), is that the dispute over nomenclature is also a struggle for recognition, dignity, and justice.

Ultimately, attempts to name without listening, to classify without dialogue, and to manage suffering through technical protocols only deepen identity fragmentation. Velho (1981) had already warned that the imposition of external definitions, even when well intentioned, tends to distort lived reality. In the present case, such distortion compromises not only reparation processes but also the reconstruction of victims' social and subjective bonds, transforming nomenclature into a central arena in the struggle for environmental justice.

6. Risk communication in technological environmental disasters

In emergency contexts, risk communication consists of an interactive and multidirectional process of exchanging information, opinions, and perceptions among experts, authorities, and affected populations, with the aim of enabling informed decision-making in situations of threat.

It is not merely a matter of disseminating technical data, but of constructing a horizontal dialogue among different fields of knowledge so that each actor involved – in this case, institutions and affected persons – may understand and respond to risks in a contextualized and coordinated manner. Communicating risk also entails contesting meanings regarding what risk is, who defines it, and who experiences it (Organização Mundial da Saúde [OMS], 2017).

In technological environmental disasters, this process also assumes ethical, political, and symbolic dimensions. Modes of communication –

and within them, the words chosen, the framing of the problem, and the strategies employed by institutions – reveal clear hierarchies of power and, consequently, dynamics of voice and silencing. When an institution, for instance, opts for terms such as “impacted” instead of “affected”, it makes not only a semantic choice but a discursive operation that shapes the boundaries of what becomes recognizable and, therefore, repairable.

As Valêncio (2014) argues, risk management in Brazil remains predominantly technocratic and exclusionary, often disregarding local knowledge and the perceptions of communities that experience risk firsthand. Risk communication cannot be understood solely as a technical tool for transmitting information about environmental or technological hazards; it is also an integral component of disaster governance and therefore operates as a device of power.

Beck (2010) suggests that in risk societies, the way risks are communicated determines not only public perception but also who is held accountable and who is excluded from the narrative of catastrophe. From this standpoint, communication is not neutral; it constructs realities that legitimize certain versions of events while marginalizing others.

Within this framework, the articulation between risk, discourse, and power becomes visible in mining-related technological environmental disasters. In the case of the Fundão event, the communicative strategies adopted by public authorities, corporations, and media outlets played a decisive role in shaping narratives of blame, responsibility, and suffering.

The technical language adopted by the Renova Foundation, frequently supported by legal and administrative jargon, operated as a form of discursive mitigation of harm, depoliticizing victims’ suffering and reframing the disaster as a mere operational contingency. This process illustrates what has been described as the symbolic violence of official narratives: the power to define what will be recognized as truth and what will be erased from the collective record (Zhoury et al., 2016).

Although the effectiveness of communication processes depends less on the quantity of information than on the credibility of sources and the participation of affected populations (Covello & Sandman, 2001), when institutional discourse monopolizes the authority to name, a gap emerges between technical narratives and lived experience, as observed in this study.

In the Fundão case, this communicative rupture manifested itself in the resistance of those affected, who began organizing and producing their own narratives through counter-communication instruments, such as the aforementioned newspaper *A Sirene*, which positions itself as a tool of expression, communication, resistance, and identity. In other words, it represents a counter-hegemonic communicative practice aimed at destabilizing official discourses and restoring the human dimension of the catastrophic event.

From this perspective, risk communication ceases to be merely a stage

of emergency management and becomes a field of political and epistemological dispute. By appropriating language and creating their own channels of expression, affected communities challenge the monopoly of technical discourse and reaffirm their status as subjects of rights and knowledge, thereby reconfiguring relations between domination and resistance.

Seen in this light, the struggle over words is, at its core, a struggle for justice and identity. When technical discourse overrides lived experience, risk is no longer simply an environmental occurrence but becomes a communicational phenomenon – a terrain where inequalities, invisibilities, and resistances are produced. Reframing communication, therefore, is an essential step toward transforming disaster governance into a genuinely democratic, plural, and socio-environmentally just process.

7. Final considerations

This article demonstrates that the terminological dispute surrounding nomenclature transcends the semantic domain, constituting a political instrument of power that directly affects the rights, identity, and social recognition of victims of technological environmental disasters.

In the case of the Fundão event, the institutional choice of the terms “accident” and “impacted” – the latter in place of “affected” – operated as a strategy of symbolic control. This choice not only euphemized collective suffering but also produced concrete effects on access to reparation, configuring an asymmetrical and exclusionary form of risk communication.

It was observed that language, in naming victimized subjects, also socially constitutes them; in this sense, discourse is performative. Naming therefore operates as a technology of power.

When institutions appropriate the authority to define who is or is not an affected person, an official narrative is established that silences and delegitimizes victims’ voices. Communication, in this context, assumes a central role: it may function either as a means of empowerment and recognition or as a mechanism of invisibilization and control. This ambivalence reinforces the need to understand risk communication not merely as the transmission of technical information, but as a political and social process of meaning-making and dispute.

The study identifies the prevalence of an institutional communication strategy focused on image management rather than on the management of vulnerability. Messages disseminated by institutions privileged narratives of mitigation and control, detached from the lived reality of affected communities. Such an approach diverges from classical perspectives, which emphasize that risk communication should prioritize social participation, transparency, and dialogue. Instead, the model observed reinforces a technocratic logic in which risk is treated as an objective and neutral datum, disregarding its cultural, symbolic, and political dimensions.

Beyond the term “affected”, already consolidated through political and social struggles, the findings indicate that the Fundão event may also be interpreted through frameworks that classify these individuals as internally displaced persons. Likewise, the term “disaster” should be employed in its derived and more precise form: technological environmental disaster.

Regarding the category of internally displaced persons, this classification expands the interpretative field applied to the situation of those affected, particularly concerning the nature of the violations experienced. It acknowledges that compulsory displacement resulting from technological environmental disasters constitutes a form of forced migration, even when it occurs within national borders. Even those who remained in affected areas often did so due to the absence of viable alternatives, as post-disaster conditions of habitability and subsistence became extremely precarious, reinforcing the coercive rather than voluntary character of their permanence.

One of the main contributions of this study is also to highlight the potential of the term “internal refugee”, a category that remains under dispute. Its relevance lies in its capacity to broaden the debate by revealing the depth of territorial, identity-based, and symbolic losses imposed on affected populations, while simultaneously denouncing the severity of human rights violations that remain obscured under technified or euphemistic labels.

Finally, this investigation shows that communication – particularly risk communication – may itself constitute a mechanism of environmental injustice rather than merely an ancillary element. The words chosen, the narrative frames adopted, and the channels of dissemination form part of the power dynamics that determine who is heard, who is silenced, and who is held accountable. Recognizing this communicational dimension is essential for building more democratic and participatory processes of reparation and prevention.

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