

‘Out of the Frying Pan into the Fire’: Mauritian Social Workers’ Perspectives on Disaster Governance in Mauritius

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Abstract

Mauritius, which is a Small Island Developing State with low economic resilience and limited capacity to deal with disasters, is currently trying to recover from two major disasters—COVID-19 and an oil spill caused by a shipwreck. This article aims to explore the Mauritian social workers’ perspectives on the disaster governance in relation to these double disasters. Data were collected from eighteen social workers using web-based/ online interview tools in September 2020. An abductive thematic network method based on governance network theory was used to analyse the collected data with the help of the ATLAS.ti software. In the findings, the perspectives of the respondents on the structures and mechanisms for disaster social work and the factors that affect disaster governance in Mauritius are presented and discussed. This article concludes that there is a lack of organised structures and mechanisms for disaster social work, and there is a need to promote good governance in disaster response in Mauritius.

Keywords: abductive thematic network analysis, COVID-19, disaster, governance network theory, oil spill, Mauritius

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Teaser Text

Mauritius is a small island state in the Indian Ocean that had to face two major disasters at the same time during the year 2020—COVID-19

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and a major oil spill caused by a shipwreck. This article explores Mauritian social workers' perspectives on the disaster governance in relation to the double disasters. The perspectives and contributions of the social workers are important in understanding and improving disaster governance since they are amongst the key actors in disaster prevention, mitigation and response. The researchers interviewed eighteen Mauritian social workers during the month of September 2020, using web-based interview tools. The interviews focused on how the respondents perceive existing structures and mechanisms for disaster social work (DSW) and what they see as factors affecting disaster governance in Mauritius. The article discusses that there is a lack of organised structures and mechanisms for DSW and that there is a need to promote good governance in disaster response in Mauritius. The article concludes that clearer disaster governance structures and mechanisms would enable Mauritian social workers to contribute in disaster response in a more effective, organised and coordinated manner.

Introduction

Disasters are defined as events that cause major losses to people and are often accompanied by major systemic damages and disruptions to social, economic and ecological environments (Harms *et al.*, 2015; Alston *et al.*, 2019). All around the world, millions of lives are affected by different types of disasters such as geophysical (e.g. earthquake), climatological (e.g. wildfires) and biological (e.g. pandemics). Pandemics—health hazards related to massive outbreaks of infectious diseases with increasing risk of morbidity and mortality over a wide geographical area—are considered as one of the most serious type of disasters (Cheval *et al.*, 2020). Processes, such as the spread of COVID-19 and ecological disasters, have an immense impact on the economic and socio-political structures of a society (Duit and Galaz, 2008).

Disaster represents a serious disruption in the functioning of a society and requires social work interventions at micro, mezzo and macro levels (Drolet *et al.*, 2015; Harms and Alston, 2018; Alston *et al.*, 2019; Harms *et al.*, 2020). Disaster Social Work (DSW) has therefore become an important component of social work education, practice and research (Nikku, 2015; Harms and Alston, 2018; Alston *et al.*, 2019). In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in scientific studies on DSW. However, most DSW studies have mainly focussed on the roles, functions, responsibilities and interventions of social workers. Very few studies have looked at the societal dynamics that affect the functioning of social workers in disaster interventions. It is known that the societal structures and power dynamics affect the organisation and functioning of social work (Fook, 2002). In this sense, there is currently a noticeable

theoretical and empirical gap on how organisational systems, structures and processes affect DSW. Particularly, there is a need for research on DSW from a disaster governance perspective.

Frahm and Martin (2009) posit that contemporary society in various parts of the world is in the midst of a paradigm shift from a 'government' paradigm to a 'governance' paradigm. The term 'governance' focuses on the creation of the conditions for ordered rule and collective action where the government is not the sole actor in dealing with societal problems and solutions (Stoker, 2018). It concerns the structures and processes for dealing with certain functions and occurrences in a collective manner. In particular, it entails functions carried out by diverse sets of actors that include not only governmental institutions but also private sector and civil society entities (Tierney, 2012). Governance, therefore, places emphasis on the building of a legitimate and effective response between the government, private sector and civil society. However, it is important to note that within governance, government still plays a central role. Although governance recognises the capacity of various actors to get things done without relying too much on the power of government to command or use its authority, it nonetheless involves government as an enabler to steer and guide collective actions through set operational norms, mechanisms and structures (Stoker, 2018).

Disaster governance refers to a set of interrelated regulatory frameworks and norms, organisations, institutions and practices within the disaster response through a collaborative approach between governmental and non-governmental actors (Sandoval and Voss, 2016). Tierney (2012) opines that disaster governance takes place in the context of and is affected by both societal and disaster-specific governance frameworks. The societal dynamics surrounding the disaster governance is therefore an important aspect that needs to be studied and understood within social work. For instance, little knowledge exists on the types of network structure that are effective in disaster response (Nowell *et al.*, 2018). As it stands, disaster governance is one of the under-researched topics within DSW. Further insights on how governance structures and factors affect disaster practice are important in the organisation and delivery of DSW in terms of education and practice.

Therefore, this article through a case-study approach aims to explore and discuss the local social workers' perspectives on disaster governance in Mauritius. It addresses the following research questions: What are the perspectives of the research participants on (i) structures and mechanisms for DSW and (ii) factors that affect disaster governance, in Mauritius?

The case context: Double disaster in Mauritius

Mauritius is a Small Island Developing State (SIDS) with a total land surface area of 2,040 km² and an Exclusive Economic Zone (sea zone) of about 2.3 million km². The island is located next to Madagascar in the southeast part of the Indian Ocean. It is a multi-ethnic and democratic country with about 1.3 million inhabitants. The country depends largely on ocean-based economy, where tourism, fishing and seafood processing are the important sectors. Other sectors of the Mauritian economy are agriculture, textile and financial services. Mauritius has a narrow resource base, high susceptibility to natural hazards, low economic resilience, and limited human and technological capacity for mitigating and adapting to the effects of disasters (Nurse and Sem, 2000). As a SIDS, Mauritius is an interesting case for studying disaster governance.

In Mauritius, disasters such as flooding and cyclone have unfortunately become common occurrences with climate change. Therefore, in 2013, Mauritius revised its structures and mechanisms with a multi-agency Disaster Governance Network (DGN). The national coordinating body for this particular network is the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Centre, which was established through 2016 The National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act, and governed by the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council. The National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council is chaired by the minister responsible for disaster management and has members who are representatives of the government, private sector and civil society (Government of Mauritius, 2016). In case of a major disaster in the country, there is the National Crisis Committee, which has its local sub-committees at district and municipality levels that form the main DGN in Mauritius.

Mauritius has a relatively well-established welfare state with free education, free health care at all levels, and a social protection system that is quite broad and extensive in coverage (Phaahla, 2014; Blin, 2020). The country has a central database—Social Register—where vulnerable households are identified for targeting social assistance provided by the government using a ‘Proxy Means Test’ system for making eligibility decisions. According to official statistics, at the end of April 2020, 10,300 households (number increased during the disasters—COVID-19 and the oil spill) were listed in the Social Register (Government of Mauritius, 2020). The Social Register is mainly used to provide social assistance to the victims of floods and cyclones.

Brief on COVID-19

In Mauritius, strict virus control measures were introduced at a relatively early stage (Khan, Soobhug, and Khan, 2020). As from the end of January 2020, all passengers arriving from Wuhan were placed in compulsory quarantine for fourteen days and passengers from other parts of China were placed under surveillance. This was quickly followed by the introduction of temperature checks for arriving passengers at the international airport as well as compulsory quarantine for all passengers arriving from high-risk countries (Kowlessur *et al.*, 2020). The situation in the country became alarming when the first cases of COVID-19 were confirmed on 18 March 2020; and within four weeks, the total number of positive cases climbed to 325 and the total number of deaths caused by the pandemic was nine (Khan *et al.*, 2020). On 19 March 2020, the island's borders were closed and the following day a national curfew was imposed. On 24 March 2020, the Government of Mauritius decided to impose a six-week national lockdown (Kowlessur *et al.*, 2020).

During the lockdown period, people could only leave their home in case of emergency, and grocery shopping was only allowed on specific days and organised alphabetically by surname. A panoply of social measures, organised by the government, accompanied the restrictions during the lockdown period. According to UNDP (2020), the measures included a 'wage assistance scheme' to guarantee the salary of employees from the private sector, a financial support to persons working in the informal sector, 'home-to-home payment system' and food pack (with basic food commodities) to vulnerable households. The strict measures that were introduced, however, badly affected the most vulnerable ones from the lowest strata of the society (Blin, 2020; L'Express, 2020a), but they were effective in controlling and reducing the spread of infection in Mauritius (Kowlessur *et al.*, 2020). Mauritius became one of the few countries to stop the spread of COVID-19 within two months after the first cases were confirmed (World Health Organisation, 2020). By the end of April 2020, ten persons had died from COVID-19 in Mauritius. Borders were re-opened on 1 October 2020 with a new scheme that allowed entry in the country only under strict procedures—a mandatory fourteen-day quarantine with confinement to hotel room in specific hotels approved by the authorities. A mandatory polymerase chain reaction testing is also carried out at regular intervals on all quarantine passengers as per an established protocol. However, the pandemic had and is still having a negative impact on the Mauritian households and has been putting significant strain on the Mauritian welfare state (Blin, 2020; Ranzani and Cheung Kai Suet, 2020).

Brief on the oil spill

In the midst of managing the COVID-19 pandemic, Mauritius was hit by the worst ecological disaster in the country's history. *Wakashio*, a Japanese-owned, Panama-registered cargo ship on its way from China to Brazil ran aground on a coral reef close to mainland Mauritius on 25 July 2020. At the beginning of August 2020, it started leaking fuel oil and diesel into the lagoon on the southeast coast. An estimated 1,000 tonnes of fuel leaked out from the ship in an area with great biodiversity and many environmentally sensitive locations, including mangroves, a marine protected area and a small island that is home to some unique wildlife (Lewis, 2020). This disaster affected the livelihood of thousands of people from the southeast coast of Mauritius. The Government of Mauritius put up a food distribution programme for those in need, and a monthly solidarity grant of Rs. 10,200 (roughly \$257) is being paid from August 2020 to fishers, fishmongers and pleasure craft licensees/operators/workers from the southeast region to compensate for the stoppage of sea activities after the oil spill.

The initial clean-up operations from the oil spill were largely organised and undertaken by volunteers coming from all over the country. In spite of government's warning to stay away from the affected zones, volunteers produced makeshift booms and placed in the water, and scrubbed oil off the shorelines and the mangroves (de Ferrer, 2020). This initial mobilisation of local residents was followed by clean-up operations led by international companies that had been contracted by the ship's insurer (Degnarain, 2020a). During this phase of the clean-up, an accident occurred in bad weather on 31 August 2020—a tugboat sank, leading to the death of three persons and the disappearance of another person.

Following the oil spill and the clean-up operation, public concern with how the government organised the disaster response brought widespread protests in the country. On 29 August 2020, approximately 100,000 people joined a peaceful march in the capital to protest against the government (Cassimally, 2020; DW, 2020). This was the biggest demonstration Mauritius has seen in forty years (DW, 2020). Another protest took place in the southeast on 12 September 2020. Protesters and critical commentators have deplored the delay in actions as the ship ran aground, as well as a lack of transparency in the response of the government to the disaster. They were concerned that late actions might have exacerbated the negative impact on the environment. The spilled oil has been found to have caused damage to mangroves and coral reefs, and there are concerns over the effect on marine mammals, since forty-seven dead and dying dolphins and whales had drifted ashore by 31 August 2020 (Degnarain, 2020b).

Theoretical background

Network Governance Theory (NGT) is perhaps one of the most popular theories in disaster governance research. It is a theory that focuses on the transformation taking place in society from a traditional hierarchical top-down to a more horizontal and collaborative way of governing. Collaborative governance between governmental and non-governmental actors is believed to promote inclusiveness, trust, accountability and legitimacy in the society (Ansell and Gash, 2007; Fischer, 2012). In addition, network governance is argued to be essential for addressing sustainability issues by collectively sharing ownership and responsibilities in environmental stewardship (Bennett *et al.*, 2018; Pittman and Armitage, 2019).

Central to the NGT is the recognition that outcomes in dealing with disaster do not just result from combined efforts of agents and institutions but arise more from the characteristics of the network within which actors co-exist (Kita, 2017). The characteristics of the network are, therefore, an important aspect in disaster governance research. The NGT on disaster research focuses particularly on studying and theorising the interrelated set of features, norms, structures, mechanisms and practices that are designed to reduce the impacts and losses associated with disasters (Tierney, 2012; Villagra and Quintana, 2017). In this sense, it becomes imperative to focus more on analysis of the characteristics of DGNs within which DSW takes place.

The NGT has its roots in system thinking and social network analysis. Although a large number of current network analyses tend to be more quantitative in nature, it is important to remember that the roots of the concept of social network lie in the qualitative analysis of social ties between individuals (Scott, 2000). In this sense, Ramia *et al.* (2018) argue that recent network studies have become too technical and require advanced-level mathematical thinking, rather than being theoretically conceptual. In particular, a qualitative approach to theoretical and conceptual network analysis allows collecting rich and in-depth data on the perceptions, meanings and experiences that individual actors (such as social workers) attach to their network (Ahrens, 2018). Such an approach contributes towards understanding the dynamisms that influence collaboration in disaster governance.

Disaster social workers are central actors in DGNs. In different parts of the world, social workers from different sectors (government, private and voluntary) are playing key roles within disaster governance teams in finding sustainable solutions to problems and challenges through networking within communities during COVID-19 pandemic (Truell and Crompton, 2020). With the governance paradigm in ascendance, there are central questions that need to be asked and answered in relation to

DSW (Frahm and Martin, 2009). Alston *et al.* (2019) state that within DGNs, social workers are often part of the frontline team functioning under an unfamiliar command and control regime and may feel alien if they are not well prepared and trained to work in such a context. In this sense, it becomes important for researchers to explore the views, experiences and perspectives of social workers on DGNs in order to have better insights and knowledge for planning DSW.

Methods

This study employs an abductive research strategy to answer the set research questions. Abductivism is a way of reasoning in undertaking scientific research, which was introduced by Charles Sanders Peirce in the 1950s; and ‘abduction’ is a process of providing scientific explanation with analogy to known/established facts on newly found empirical evidence (Peirce, 1960, 1955 as referred in Levin-Rozalis, 2004). In brief, abduction is the use of logics in reaching theoretical explanations on empirical evidence. Abductive research strategy therefore requires researchers to make back and forth movement, between the gathered empirical data and known theoretical facts, in explaining the discovery from the research done in field. Accordingly, before data gathering, the researchers undertook a literature review on NGT to develop a theoretical framework using ATLAS.tiV.9 software for guiding the preparation of an interview guide (Silver and Lewins, 2014). The theoretical framework was also used for developing a coding list based on the dominant themes from the NGT as well as for making inferences to the known theoretical facts in the process of data analysis.

Identification and recruitment of research participants were organised through social networking sites such as Facebook, Messenger and WhatsApp. Data were gathered during the month of September 2020 through sixteen online interviews with eighteen Mauritian social workers using technological tools such as Zoom, WhatsApp and Facebook/Messenger. Two of the interviews, each had two social workers. The respondents preferred to participate jointly in providing answers to the interviewers since they were colleagues working in the same area. Thematic saturation determined the total number of research participants interviewed for this study. All interviews were conducted in the Creole language, except one that was in English. The first author translated some of the quotations from the respondents that are presented in the findings sections of this article. All interviewees have at least a university degree in social work or related field such as sociology or psychology and they were all involved in DSW. Table 1 provides a brief description of the respondents.

Table 1 Respondents

Respondents (Code)	Gender	Social work field	Years of experience (approx.)	Employment sector	Post-disaster involvement
R1	Female	Community development	More than fifteen	Government	COVID and oil spill
R2	Female	Fieldwork trainer	More than twenty-five	Voluntary	COVID
R3	Male	Youth Organisation	More than fifteen	Government	COVID and oil spill
R4*	Female	Community-based worker	More than twenty	Voluntary	COVID
R5*	Male	Community-based worker	More than twenty-five	Voluntary	COVID
R6	Female	Corporate social responsibility	More than twenty-five	Private	COVID and oil spill
R7	Male	Drug rehabilitation	More than twenty-five	Voluntary	COVID
R8	Female	Family welfare	More than twenty	Government	COVID
R9	Female	Mental health	Less than five	Government	COVID
R10	Female	Corporate social responsibility	More than fifteen	Private	COVID and oil spill
R11	Female	Community development	More than ten	Government	COVID and oil spill
R12	Male	Community development	More than thirty	Government	COVID
R13	Female	Community development	More than fifteen	Government	COVID
R14	Female	Family welfare	More than fifteen	Government	COVID
R15	Female	Child welfare	More than five	Government	COVID
R16**	Female	Community development	More than five	Voluntary	COVID
R17**	Male	Community development	More than five	Voluntary	COVID
R18	Male	Youth organisation	More than twenty-five	Government	COVID and oil spill

Notes: R4* participated together in the interview with R5*. R16** participated together in the interview with R17**.

Both authors have Mauritian nationality, but are currently affiliated with a Swedish University; and, given that Mauritius does not have a national research ethics board, the guidelines and requirements of the Swedish law on social research ethics have been taken into consideration in this research. According to the Swedish law on social research ethics (SFS 2003:460), social research that does not involve any records of names or any details that could connect a specific person to a crime or illegal activity do not need to have ethical approval from a board. Thus, this study did not require ethical approval from a research board. Nonetheless, this study followed the general social research ethical guidelines as outlined by [Hardwick and Worsley \(2011\)](#). The researchers therefore abided with central ethical principles such as non-maleficence and voluntary participation. All respondents provided informed consent to participate on being informed about the purpose of the study. Respondents were informed that anonymised interview recordings through digital audio devices would be safely locked with a password in a secure computer. Steps were also taken to ensure anonymity in reporting the findings.

Gathered data were analysed using an Abductive Thematic Network Analysis (ATNA) method with the help of ATLAS.ti software ([Rambaree and Faxelid, 2013](#); [Rambaree, 2018](#)). ATNA is a combination of an abductive theory of method as outlined by [Haig \(2008\)](#) and a thematic network analysis approach as suggested by [Attride-Stirling \(2001\)](#). The gathered data were put in the ATLAS.ti and several features were used in coding, sorting and categorising the data. The data analysis process then moved to another level where the 'Network' feature in ATLAS.ti was used. The 'Network' feature provides a working platform where linkages between themes are created for supporting analysis and visualisation of the findings ([Friese, 2019](#)). Using this particular feature, the researchers created a network of themes from the gathered data using ATNA with ATLAS.ti. The thematic network helped in providing answers to the set research questions for this study (refer to [Figure 1](#)). In the process of data analysis, three types of memos—analytical, reflexive and theoretical—were used. The answers to the set research questions are presented as central themes—'Structures and Mechanisms' and 'Factors Affecting Disaster Governance'—in the 'Findings and discussion' section.

Findings and discussion

The perspectives of the research participants: Structures and mechanisms

All respondents stated that they were engaged in disaster response (refer to [Table 1](#)), and they were mostly involved in organising and delivering

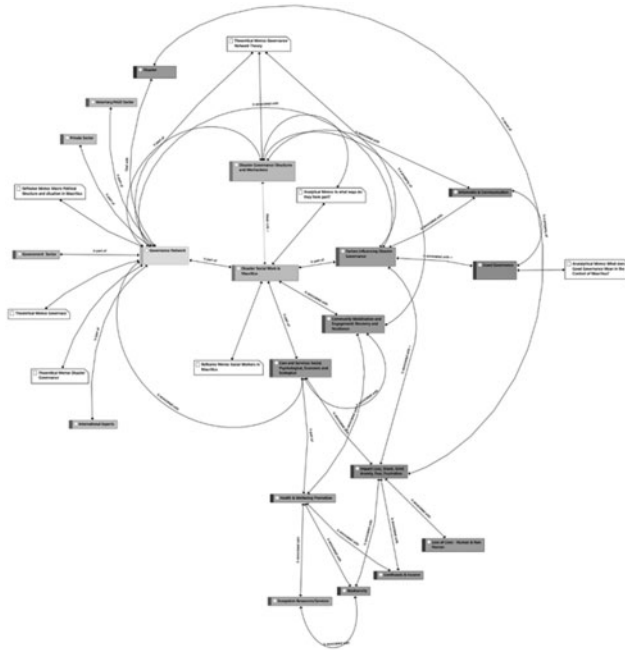


Figure 1: Thematic network analysis.

care and services to the most vulnerable populations and communities of the Mauritian society. During the lockdown period, some of the respondents were involved in providing door-to-door pension money (cash) to the elderly. Almost all the respondents reported that during the lockdown period social problems, such as domestic violence, theft and substance abuse, had escalated in the country. Some of the respondents from the voluntary and private sectors, therefore, created their own mechanisms to provide counselling and therapy through telephone and Internet to individuals/families that were in need of psychosocial support during the lockdown.

Some of the respondents who are employed with the government reported that they were facilitating the process of social aid to all those who lost their livelihoods because of COVID-19 and the oil spill. The respondents from the voluntary sector reported that they were also involved in mobilising resources and providing day-to-day necessities to the most vulnerable victims of COVID-19 and the oil spill. Respondents working in the private sector also reported involvement in similar interventions as part of their organisations' corporate social responsibility activities. One of the respondents from the private sector highlighted that their network—of private companies and community-based organisations from regions affected by the oil spill—was also involved in designing a

community resilience plan. In this context, one of the respondents stated:

We adopted the same approach in delivering food packs [as done by the government organisation] for all those who did not have money to buy their food [referring to the oil spill] ... now we are working on a long-term plan for sustainable livelihoods in the regions... (R6)

Two of the respondents (R11 and R6) from the private sector were of the view that the Social Register had failed to capture some of the victims of disasters. They, therefore, had to create their own (parallel to the government) structure/mechanism to reach out to those who were left out from the Social Register and provided certain basic services that were not provided by the government. For instance, one respondent from the private sector reported the following:

... [the government] run social services through ... financial needs and not the broader human needs ... The 'Social Register' requires people to have a permanent address and in Mauritius ... we have a number of people who are *Sans Domicile Fixe* [homeless] ... Our network funded activities for about 20,000 families that were not in the 'Social Register' ... We also had to attend to people who had other problems than financial ones ... listening to the day-to-day problems of the people ... all the small businesses are going to be affected for a long period [referring to the impact of the oil spill]. (R11)

The majority of respondents reported that they were aware of some national and local level structures and mechanisms set up for dealing with disasters in Mauritius. Some respondents reported that they were/or in the past had been part of disaster structures such as the local and national crisis committees set up by the government. On the same issue, respondent R2 from the voluntary sector stated that social workers operating in the voluntary sectors were supposed to be represented in the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council through the Mauritius Council of Social Service. The Mauritius Council of Social Service is an umbrella organisation representing the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and not the social workers in Mauritius. One respondent (R2) opined that Mauritius need to have a National Council of Social Work (NCSW) for better representation of social workers in structures such as the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council. According to her, some years ago, there were efforts towards the setting up of an NCSW in Mauritius; however, because of political reasons this project was frozen. As another respondent (R11) said that, '...this [the NCSW bill] is lying in some government drawers for years...' Indeed, in the year 2016, the Ministry of Social Security, National Solidarity and Reform Institutions and UNDP-Mauritius (2016) had launched consultancy services for setting

up an NCSW in Mauritius. Yet, to date, no such structure through which professional social workers can be represented exists in Mauritius.

According to the NGT, effective networking structures often require both horizontal and vertical governance arrangements between the key actors through flexible mechanisms that could be adjusted depending on the context and conditions (Davies, 2012; Fischer, 2012; Villagra and Quintana, 2017). In DGN, a panoply of diverse organisations from different sectors need to come together under one centrally coordinated structure in a united effort in disaster governance (Drolet *et al.*, 2018). In the time of disaster, it is indeed challenging to figure out how to structure a disaster network that reconciles the contributions and demands of all key actors (Nowell *et al.*, 2018). Hence, this is the reason why it is important that public authorities must not only create strategic and non-rigid structures but also regularly cultivate disaster networks, for instance, through listening to the legitimate demands of the key actors in order to have an efficacious disaster governance (Davies, 2012; Fischer, 2012). In this endeavour, the State of Mauritius as a central node in the DGN needs to create a dynamic equilibrium through different mechanisms for the construction of legitimate and effective responses between the contributions and demands of the market, government and the civil society (Villagra and Quintana, 2017). In this sense, for instance, it is imperative that the State of Mauritius considers the demand, and understands the importance, of a structure such as the NCSW through which social workers can have their representation in disaster governance.

The perspectives of the research participants: Factors affecting disaster governance

All respondents reported that COVID-19 and the oil spill came as a shock to everyone and that nobody in Mauritius was prepared to deal with such disasters. Gathered evidence from the respondents revealed that there was a lack of information and coordination during the initial phases at all levels, which affected the disaster responses in relation to both COVID-19 and the oil spill. According to most respondents, lack of leadership and a central disaster coordination mechanism created uncertainties, fear and panic in the country. This chaotic scenario with uncertainties and lack of effective coordination seems to be common in many other disaster contexts. Several researchers have highlighted similar conditions and occurrences from their respective field studies (Pentaraki, 2013; Alipour *et al.*, 2015; Drolet *et al.*, 2018; Alston *et al.*, 2019).

According to some of the respondents, the government in Mauritius took quick and wise decisions in the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic to lockdown the country, but no clear protocols existed in terms

of how social workers, especially those working in the private and voluntary sectors, can bring their contributions to the disaster response. According to several respondents, during the lockdown period, people from the communities who were desperate for help were constantly calling the social workers from voluntary and private sectors that could not do much because of restrictions. In the case of the oil spill, most of the respondents reported that days went without any of them knowing how they could effectively bring their contributions in a well-organised and coordinated manner through proper structures and mechanisms. For instance, two of the respondents (R3 and R18) reported that after the oil spill, they felt lost, and they did not know who to contact for information and how to intervene to save their local beaches and the marine life. After some days, they took the risk to organise a cleaning campaign, which was considered as a 'civil disobedience'. The actions of youth volunteers to remove layers of oil sludge from the beach and making absorbent barriers of straw stuffed into fabric sacks in an attempt to contain and absorb the oil from the sea were, in fact, against an order from the government asking people to leave the clean-up to local authorities (de Ferrer, 2020; Lewis, 2020). In a similar way, Alston *et al.* (2019) state that, the strong desire for community members to be actively engaged in the post-disaster clean-up is often overruled for safety concerns. Thus, it is important for disaster governance to have planned structures and mechanisms as part of disaster preparedness.

Only three respondents (all from the government sector) were aware of existing protocols to be followed in case of disasters, such as cyclones and flooding. On this issue, one of the respondent stated:

... we have well-established protocols to deal with cyclones in Mauritius ... But, during COVID-19 and the Wakashio [the oil spill], we did not know where to start and what to do ... we are not organised in Mauritius to face such calamities [referring to COVID-19 and the oil spill]... (R18)

According to most of the respondents, the lack of information and coordination created a lack of trust and transparency in the Mauritian government's leadership capacity in the DGN. In this sense, Alston *et al.* (2019) rightly point out that confusion in structures of governance reflects the complexities in disaster, and often government authorities charged with leadership for disasters may be ill-equipped to face such complex realities. Some of the respondents highlighted the frustration of people who took to the streets to protest against the government's incapacity to organise disaster response. According to one of the respondents (R9), it was the lack of a well-organised information system that created more panic and the proliferation of rumours amongst the citizens in both cases of disaster—COVID-19 and the oil spill. For instance, she pointed out that during the early phase of the pandemic, there were

rumours circulating in Mauritius that the government officials were hiding the 'true figures' on the number of people infected with and dying from COVID-19 in the country. In fact, transparency in the governance of disaster related to COVID-19 was questioned in local press (Chenney, 2020). In the case of the oil spill, several respondents pointed out that rumours were quickly spreading in the country about the wrecked ship carrying illicit drugs for some top government officials, and this was the main reason why it took so long for the government to act. This particular rumour regarding drug business linked with the oil spill was reported in several local media (Mosaheb, 2020; Ramgulam *et al.*, 2020). Lack of clear and organised dissemination of information, therefore, had considerable impact on disaster governance. As one of the respondents stated:

There is a mixed-reaction in the society ... leading to confusion ... When there is lack of information, the human mind is programmed to look for information and process information from what is readily available ... clear and right information need to dominate ... otherwise any kind of information will be taken to fill the existing gap. (R9)

All respondents in one way or another highlighted the importance of good governance in terms of responsiveness, rule of law, transparency and accountability in disaster governance. According to some of the respondents, lack of 'good governance' highly affected the disaster responses in Mauritius. Indeed, 'good governance' is one of the most important factors in effective DGN (Chhotray and Stoker, 2009; Tierney, 2012; Kita, 2017). In addition, some of the respondents revealed that there was an increase of fear and concern for oppression and abuse of power by government authorities, especially in terms of 'freedom of expression', in Mauritius during the disasters. Indeed, such concerns were also reported in the local media in Mauritius (Defimedia, 2020; L'Express, 2020b). Moreover, five respondents (R1, R6, R11, R12 and R18) strongly voiced out their opinions regarding the rise of corruption in Mauritius. For instance, one respondent said:

I do not have inside information, but my gut feeling tells me, there are many loose things going on ... people are afraid ... there are good and intelligent people in the government, but they cannot work in such an environment... (R6)

In particular, governance network is grounded on the philosophy of socio-political transformation towards good governance with specified consideration given to horizontal power distribution to people, rather than having a vertical hierarchical power structure that has often been linked with oppression and abuse (Chhotray and Stoker, 2009; Davies, 2012; Netelenbos, 2020). Indeed, social workers operating within the DGN with their professional skills and competence can play a vital role in promoting good governance. Within the DGN, social workers, for

instance, can share responsibilities in collective discussion on, and creation of, disaster governance structures and mechanisms built on core principles of good governance. Social workers bring with them to DGN their core professional competence and values on social justice, human rights and anti-oppressive practice (Alston *et al.*, 2019). In a similar manner, Drolet *et al.* (2018) posit that social workers make important and unique contributions in disaster network by working with marginalised people in supportive and compassionate ways and considering a socio-political structural analysis of oppression and inequality.

Limitations and conclusion

The findings of this study need to be considered with two main limitations. First, this study presents findings from a qualitative methodology only, as the emphasis was placed on exploring issues. In fact, the abductive theory of method requires researchers to develop hypotheses from the qualitative methodology to be tested through confirmatory quantitative analysis (Haig and Evers, 2016). At this stage, inferences from the findings of this study should be made with caution. Second, the study is based on respondents that were chosen on a convenience basis—those who were available and accepted to participate. The findings and discussion, therefore, need to be generalised with a certain degree of caution. However, as it can be found in Table 1, the sample has a representation of diversity of social workers from Mauritius. In addition, in analysing the gathered data, the researchers have also tried to validate the respondents' quotations with materials from other sources, such as journalistic reports. The study presents the respondents' perspectives on disaster governance in Mauritius and highlights areas of improvement. What could follow from this is a clear plan for change. Whilst this is outside the scope of this article, it could be the focus of future studies.

This study concludes that Mauritius needs to create clear disaster governance structures and mechanisms so that social workers can bring their contributions to disaster response in a more effective, organised and coordinated manner. Currently, there is no official organisation for representing social workers in the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council. In addition, there is also an absence of clearly spelled out protocols for disasters such as pandemics and major oil spills. Currently, DSW in Mauritius is also affected by governance factors such as lack of information and coordination as well as absence of 'good governance' in terms of responsiveness, rule of law, transparency and accountability. Mauritian social workers need to continue their efforts to develop collaborative networks involving key actors, particularly people from the community, in disaster response. Collaborative networks are essential in transformation towards good governance (Ansell and Gash, 2007).

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