

## Social work students' and practitioners' views on the need for training Caribbean social workers in disaster management

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In recent times, various countries have experienced the ravages of major natural disasters like hurricanes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, floods and earthquakes. They have also had to deal with the repercussions of human-made disasters engineered by terrorists. Major disasters of any kind cause a multiplicity of social and economic problems and wreak havoc in the lives of individuals, families and communities (Centre for Mental Health and NSW Institute of Psychiatry, 2000; Yanay and Benjamin, 2005).

According to the Centre for Mental Health and the New South Wales (NSW) Institute of Psychiatry (2000: 5) 'less developed countries have greater morbidity and mortality from disasters than do more developed countries even when population density is controlled'. Thus, disasters can have a severe impact on the socio-economic bases of small developing states with fragile economies such as those of the Caribbean. Many of these countries already lack an adequate public health infrastructure and structured emergency planning, efficient communication and transportation systems, and the human and material resources to mitigate a major disaster and/or ensure recovery. Ironically, a country can never prepare enough for a disaster, particularly a natural disaster, since it is

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**Key words** ● Caribbean ● cultural competence ● disaster ● disaster management ● marginalized groups ● training

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often difficult to gauge, beforehand, the magnitude of destruction that may result.

### **Background and research context**

Brathwaite (2000) notes that the Caribbean has experienced several disaster events ranging from natural disasters like floods, hurricanes, volcanoes and earthquakes to man-induced events like industrial and transportation accidents and fires. The island of Montserrat continues to grapple with the problems arising from an active volcano that has already destroyed part of its landscape and dislocated a segment of its population. Guyana is still trying to recover from the floods of February 2005 which caused severe damage to homes and businesses, while Grenada remains in the throes of social recovery and reconstruction as it deals with the destruction left by Hurricane Ivan which hit it in October 2004. Ivan caused the deaths of 28 persons, leaving approximately one-third of the Island's population homeless (Organization of Eastern Caribbean States, 2004) and damaging schools and businesses (Nanton, 2006). The residents of both Dominica and Trinidad experienced trauma and minor dislocations when earthquakes struck those islands in 2005 and 2006 respectively. Jamaica has had more than its full share of devastation by hurricanes, floods and mudslides, and the people of Haiti continue to suffer the impacts of both natural and human-made disasters. Barbados has also suffered losses from hurricanes and floods over the years.

Brathwaite (2000: 2) sums it up like this:

Disasters are part of the reality of living in the Caribbean, the irony being, that the very qualities which imbue the region with its attractiveness also contribute to its vulnerability. Disasters, however, can be properly managed and should be seen as a challenge to the region, one which strengthens the internal capacity of the various countries to go beyond coping with disasters to successfully managing disasters by reducing their impacts on the region.

Social workers in the Caribbean are among the professionals who are involved in disaster management. They are called upon to assist in preparations for an impending disaster and are usually in the forefront of rescue and recovery efforts. However, the field of disaster management has not been given enough attention in the education of social workers in the Caribbean to provide them with the requisite skills and knowledge for effective intervention.

The involvement of social workers in disaster management on Barbados, for example, can be traced to Hurricane Janet which affected the island in 1955. In response to the destruction, social workers employed with the Social Welfare Department were involved in recovery efforts. Many of their duties included the provision of needs assessments, overseeing temporary shelters and setting up food distribution centers for hundreds of persons who were displaced. Their additional responsibilities included the administration of trust funds that were provided to meet the needs of children whose parents had died during the disaster. At the time, most of these workers were untrained, with the exception of a few who had received basic social work training in the UK and Jamaica.

Today, all social workers employed by the government of Barbados are charged with responding to the physical, social and mental health needs of persons affected by the trauma of disasters. The government of Barbados, having recognized the need for a coordinated response to disasters, has established a Central Emergency Relief Organization (CERO) and is in the process of setting up district relief organizations in each parish of the island. Social workers employed by the Government Welfare Department and the Community Development Department are members of the planning and response teams of CERO. This means that social workers in Barbados now have clearly defined roles in disaster management through their involvement with CERO. However, the training of social workers in disaster management has not kept pace with the new requirements in the field. Updated training is essential for social workers throughout the Caribbean, not only those in Barbados, given their critical role in promoting the social, cultural, economic and political development of the countries in this region.

Following the destruction in Grenada by Hurricane Ivan during 2004, the University of the West Indies, recognizing its key role in the sustainable development of the Caribbean, re-established the Disaster Management Research Network. It also developed a Center for Disaster Risk Reduction. The *Framework for Governance and Programme of Work* for the center (Collymore, 2006: 12–13) stated: ‘the potential of natural disasters to retard Caribbean development goes beyond the direct cost of damage to the local environment, communities and infrastructure. It threatens the sustainability of economic development. The mere threat of natural hazards impacts can seriously setback performance in the key engine of economic development, tourism.’

Acknowledging this threat to the livelihood of the Caribbean region's inhabitants, it is important that social workers intervene effectively at times of disaster. The research discussed in this article presents the views of social work students and practitioners in Barbados about the need for formal training in the area of disaster management. The research was conducted with a view to developing a course in disaster management and infusing disaster management content into the curriculum of the undergraduate program in social work at the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus.

### **Definition**

There are several definitions of disaster. Common to most definitions is that 'a disaster is a severe destruction that greatly exceeds the coping capacity of the affected community' (Centre for Mental Health and NSW Institute of Psychiatry, 2000: 3). Thus, a disaster can be defined as 'an event which seriously disrupts the normal functioning of the affected society causing widespread human, material, or environmental losses which exceed the ability of the affected society to cope, using its own resources' (Brathwaite, 2000: 4).

### **Literature review**

The review of the literature will focus on the impact of natural disasters on the well-being of people and the current role of social work education in training professionals to respond appropriately. Natural disasters are not new phenomena. However, there is greater awareness and concern about their destructive power and their impact on the bio-psychosocial, environmental and economic systems of individuals, families, organizations and communities. Depending on the magnitude and duration of a disaster, a country and its people can suffer the impact for years. Notwithstanding that there is now a more efficient and effective response before, during and after a disaster in many countries, some still find it difficult to regain pre-disaster functioning, and their inhabitants may experience the bio-psychosocial consequences long after the event (Seidenberg, 2006). Beside the obvious physical destruction that may occur as a result of a disaster, there are also the many unforeseen and subtle consequences to individuals which may include dislocation and personal difficulties such as breakdown in interpersonal relationships, and feelings of hopelessness and despair (Bryce, 2001; Ehrenreich, 2001).

Bryce (2001) observes that almost every segment of a population will be affected by a disaster, but that poor people, especially women, children, older people and the disabled are much more vulnerable to its devastating consequences. The poor are generally affected by substandard housing, 'overcrowded homes, poor levels of sanitation, a shortage of basic medical services, inadequate levels of preparedness and a lack of resources with which to rebuild' (Bryce, 2001: 5). Ehrenreich (2001: 6) concurs, with the remark that 'many characteristics of poorer countries make their people more vulnerable to the effects of a disaster' and cites conditions such as substandard housing, the precarious location of the homes of the poor on flood plains and unstable hillsides and the poor response of badly managed bureaucracies to disaster relief efforts. Seidenberg (2006: 5) notes that 'marginalized populations are not only likely to be vulnerable to disasters due to self-evident problems of geography and resources, but are considerably disadvantaged by less obvious cultural and social phenomena'. He contends that the experience of New Orleans with the Katrina disaster provides a glaring example of the negative impact of a natural disaster on poor and marginalized peoples. He describes how these groups can suffer in the aftermath of disaster even in a rich industrialized country such as the USA. He suggests that the slow ineffectual response by the state agencies, including the Federal Emergency Relief Agency (FEMA), exacerbated by the lack of a culturally competent response, further disadvantaged those persons who were already in a vulnerable position. The authors Bryce (2001), Ehrenreich (2001) and Seidenberg (2006) conclude that although all persons are affected by a disaster, the poor suffer more.

Brathwaite (2000) suggests that the reasons for people's increasing vulnerability are: rapid population growth so that disaster events now claim more lives; environmental degradation which renders the land more prone to floods and landslides; increasing industrialization without the requisite safety measures; and the absence of prevention or mitigation provisions in development planning. He cites poverty, rapid urbanization, war and civil strife, changes in cultural practices, lack of public awareness and information as other factors that contribute to the vulnerability of communities and societies to the impact of hazards. This view is clearly pertinent in reference to areas that have suffered from both human-made and natural disasters. For example, although massive disasters such as Hurricane Andrew in Florida in 1992, the tsunami in Asia in 2004

and Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005 affected all socio-economic classes, the poorer segments of the population suffered more. In Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica and other countries of the Caribbean, the poor was that segment of the population that was most displaced by disasters caused by hurricanes, volcanoes, mudslides and floods.

Social work is committed to helping vulnerable persons, including those affected by disasters. In order to be effective helpers they need to be appropriately trained. The following discussion of the results of the survey conducted with social work students and social work practitioners in Barbados provides valuable insights into the needs of Caribbean social workers for training in the field of disaster management.

## **Methodology**

The research employed a conveniently accessed sample of Levels I, II and III social work students at the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus and social work practitioners in social service agencies in Barbados. One hundred and twenty-five questionnaires were distributed to students and practitioners and 72 were completed and returned. The completed questionnaires were coded and the data analyzed. The use of a convenient sample has implications for the generalization of the data beyond the population of students and practitioners that were sampled. However, the findings are considered in terms of their implications for education, training, practice and research in social work.

For the purposes of the research, disaster was defined as 'an extraordinary event, either natural or human-made, concentrated in time and space, that often results in damage to property and harm to human life or health and that is disruptive of the ability of some social institutions to continue fulfilling their essential functions' (Barker, 1999: 131). Disaster management was defined as 'mitigation, preparation, response and recovery in the event of a disaster'.

The questionnaire was self-administered and used as a means of reaching a large number of respondents in the shortest possible time. It contained both open-ended and close-ended questions and was constructed so that respondents could give mainly a 'yes' or 'no' or 'not sure' response. It required respondents to give biographical data such as age, employment status, year/level at university and if employed, their duties at their place of employment. Data

were also collected on respondents' training in the field of disaster management and crisis interventions, their response to crises as part of their jobs, their views on the adequacy of their skills and knowledge to help persons affected by disasters, the type of social work training that in their view would be useful to social workers in responding effectively to persons affected by disasters, and whether they believed that social workers should be trained in disaster management and at what level of training. Information was also collected on respondents' own interest in being trained in disaster management, the level of training that they believe would be required for social workers employed in the field, the role for social workers as employees in disaster relief organizations, and finally, whether disaster management should be included in social work training at the baccalaureate level (BSc Degree in Social Work) and the importance of such training.

### **The findings of the data**

The research findings produced the following results.

- Demographic data: 34 percent of respondents were in the 20–29 age group; 33.3 percent in the 29–39 age group; 25 percent in the 40–59 age group and 7 percent in the 50–59 age group.
- Employment status: 76.4 percent of respondents stated that they were employed.
- Student status: only 38.9 percent of respondents indicated student status. Of these, 16.7 percent were full-time students and 22.2 percent were part-time. Most of the respondents were in Levels I and II of the BSc in Social Work Programme (26.4% and 26% respectively). Eighteen percent were in level III of the programme. A total of 24 social work practitioners responded. Of this number, 12 were employed with the Welfare Department, a social work agency involved in disaster management.

Sixty-eight percent of the respondents who were employed indicated that they worked directly with clients, while 25 percent indicated that they worked in administration. Fifty-seven respondents, approximately 80 percent, had no training in disaster management. Of the 20 percent who had received training, 11 percent had received in-service training and some other training. Forty-eight percent of those who had received training indicated that they were trained in crisis intervention methods. These had received such training

through social work courses at university or through in-service training. Only 28 percent of respondents indicated that they responded to crises as part of their jobs. Crises were identified as fires, natural disasters like floods and hurricanes, child abuse, domestic violence and other personal crises. However, 50 percent stated that they could be called upon to respond in times of natural disasters and 32 percent stated that they also had to respond to other types of disasters, such as house fires, worksite and automobile accidents involving trauma and/or the death of persons.

When asked about the type of training that would equip them to respond to persons in times of disaster, they replied as follows:

- 84.7 percent of respondents identified training in intervention techniques, loss and grief counseling and disaster preparedness;
- 86.1 percent identified disaster management;
- 83.3 percent crisis counseling;
- 72.2 percent critical incident debriefing;
- 63.8 percent resiliency;
- 80.6 percent disaster prevention and mitigation; and
- 77.8 percent training in conflict management.

The majority of respondents believed social workers and other human service professionals should be trained in disaster management and they considered this training to be important. Eighty-three percent considered it to be very important and 94 percent stated that they would participate in training in disaster management if it were available. Most respondents favoured workshops – 48.6 percent – and in-service training – 48.6 percent – as the modes of delivery for such training. Seventy-five percent wanted a course on disaster management to be offered in the BSc Degree in Social Work and 94 percent were of the view that the field of disaster management was becoming more important given the recent disasters worldwide. Seventy-nine percent were also of the view that social workers have an impact both before and after disaster. Only a small percentage of respondents, 27.7 percent, were members of their local district relief organizations.

Respondents generally stated that medical assistance, housing, counselling, food, water and building construction services should be available for persons during times of disaster. Only 37 percent felt that giving money to those affected was necessary. Seventy-nine percent of respondents considered the present arrangements for disaster management in Barbados to be satisfactory, but that



the government needed to do more in the area of disaster prevention and mitigation. Respondents emphasized the need for more attention to be given to vulnerable groups such as older people, children, disabled people, critically ill persons and those who need special care at times of national emergencies.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

The magnitude of disasters worldwide and people's increasing vulnerability must place disaster management as a national priority for countries. Few social work programs in the Caribbean have this content in their curriculum. The frequency of disasters, especially of hurricanes and floods in the region, however, requires that content on disaster management is infused through the social work curriculum to enable students to develop the knowledge and skills necessary for this field of work. Disaster response work must 'be acknowledged as part of social work practice and profession' (Yanay and Benjamin, 2005: 263). This was highlighted by respondents in the study who indicated a desire for knowledge and skills in crisis intervention, stress management, grief and bereavement counseling, conflict resolution, group work, problem analysis, data collection and research, case management, networking, advocacy and leadership, particularly as they relate to disaster intervention.

In addition to the areas emphasized by respondents, social workers need to be exposed to a body of knowledge on disaster management that includes relevant theory and the disaster experiences of marginalized groups, including those from other countries. They also need to know how to help persons who are affected by disasters maintain their links to social networks to enable their recovery, how to engage in culturally-sensitive practice, and how to advocate for resources to meet the needs of persons who are affected by disaster (Miley et al., 2004).

There is a dearth of social work research in the Caribbean, particularly the Eastern Caribbean (Rock and Valtonen, 2002). In order to develop practice and policy responses appropriate for this area, social work research must be undertaken on the current micro-, mezzo- and macro-level responses to disasters and disaster management, the coping styles of persons affected by disasters and the effectiveness of interventions before, during and after disaster. Such research, involving both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, will help to improve disaster preparedness and responses at all levels of practice.

The findings of the survey indicate that few social workers in Barbados are involved in disaster management. We suspect that a survey of other countries in the region would be likely to reveal the same result. Governments in the Caribbean region need to recognize the pivotal role that professional social workers can play as members of disaster response teams. Social work practitioners and students who are trained with a generalist approach already have a working knowledge of the basic processes, skills and roles required for effecting work with individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities in need. However, as Yanay and Benjamin (2005: 272–3) point out, ‘To function effectively in emergencies social workers require specific knowledge, attitudes and skills that are not necessarily part of social work education and training.’ Having training in disaster management will, therefore, increase their competence in this area.

The curricula of social work education programs, including those offered at the University of the West Indies, therefore must prepare social work students to be effective in mitigating the effects of disasters on individuals, families, organizations and communities. The *Global Standards on Social Work Education* (IASSW and IFSW, 2004: 7) state that social work students should have ‘sufficient practice skills in, and knowledge of, assessment and intervention to achieve the identified goals of the programme for the purposes of developmental, protective, preventive and/or therapeutic intervention – depending on the particular focus of the programme’.

Second, the curriculum should promote ‘the capacity building and empowerment of individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities through a human-centered developmental approach’ (IASSW and IFSW, 2004: 8) and the *Standards* recommend that schools of social work in their core curricula aspire to ‘an identification of, and selection for inclusion in the programme, curricula as determined by local, national and/or regional/international needs and priorities’ (2004: 6).

We recommend that a course in disaster management be included in the curricula of all social work programmes in the Caribbean region. Such a course should include a fieldwork component, with students having practical experience in a disaster response agency to gain first-hand knowledge of the type of responses required. Additionally, opportunities to have students placed in disaster management agencies, as part of their field placement experience, should be encouraged.

The Association of Caribbean Social Work Educators (ACSWE) should also foster awareness through workshops on disaster management in selected Caribbean countries that would engage students, social work practitioners and members of non-governmental organizations in the region in a dialogue on the issue. Such an initiative would also identify areas for culturally-competent approaches to disasters. Moreover, social workers in the Caribbean must cooperate and collaborate with local, regional and international agencies in promoting disaster risk reduction interventions that will contribute to sustainable development in the region.

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