



NATURAL DISASTERS IN ZIMBABWE: THE PRIMER FOR SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTION

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ABSTRACT

Around the globe, social workers have been increasingly called to work in disaster settings and collaborate with many actors including faith-based humanitarian organisations. Unfortunately, in Zimbabwe, social work practice still perpetuates the values and ideals of neo-liberalism; without careful consideration of the consequences of natural disasters on vulnerable populations. This study was conducted in Tsholotsho, paying attention to the victims of Cyclone Dineo. Using mixed methodology, the study established that natural disasters have undermined the social functioning of vulnerable groups of people; children, women, elderly and persons with disabilities in Zimbabwe. The paper also unravels the role of social work in disaster management; before, during and post disaster phases. Using Cyclone Dineo as a case study, the study found out that social work interventions were limited before and during the disaster phases. The profession was reactive and participated in the aftermath of the disaster. It was therefore recommended that social work's role in disaster settings can be improved through; advocacy, inter-professional collaboration and extensive research in disaster issues. The paper concluded that social work values and principles assign the profession to respond timeously to the contemporary challenges facing the society.

KEY TERMS: *Natural disasters; social work; relevance; Zimbabwe*

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INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe has had its fair share of natural disasters mainly in the form of droughts and floods which come as a direct result of climate change (Bhaiseni, 2017:26). The most recent tropical cyclone Dineo, a natural disaster that hit Tsholotsho district in Zimbabwe in February 2017, caused flooding and left a trail of destruction in various villages. Hundreds of people were left homeless, livelihoods were destroyed and one life was lost (Bulawayo24, 2017: 21 February 2017). Tropical cyclone Dineo pummeled Zimbabwe's Tsholotsho district, killing seven people on its first day of occurrence (Hills & Nhamire, 2017). Schools, roads, electricity and government offices in both provinces were closed and infrastructure was damaged. It is also estimated that more than 4 000 homesteads, houses and Government structures had been demolished by the floods which also destroyed crops and livestock (Hills & Nhamire, 2017). Although, perhaps, not as widely publicized as other social work domains, social workers may find themselves called upon to help others in the wake of such a natural disaster or catastrophic event. As demonstrated above, natural disasters create socioeconomic challenges which threaten the realisation of social justice in society. Wittingly or unwittingly, social work intervention remains invisible before and during disasters and is mainly noted post the disaster (Muzingili, 2016). To this end, Bhaiseni (2017:27) believes that social work practice in Zimbabwe still focuses on welfaristic and residual social work neglecting environmental and disaster issues.

Natural disasters are intricately linked to the concept of social vulnerability. Social vulnerability is a term that is familiar in literature on disasters and its impact on humanity especially the poor groups of society (Mavhura et al., 2017:1). Social work views disasters in a stress related framework tinted by lenses that consider the disruption of societal functioning at a human level. In this case, natural disasters disrupt social functioning of people by destroying the common forms of survival such as food security, health, education and other related aspects of humanity. So often, issues related to quality of life, welfare and human interaction in disasters are also encapsulated by the social work profession. This however, provides the foundation with which the social work profession can demonstrate its role in disaster related situations.

Buttressed by social work generic principles, values, ethical decision-making frameworks and human theories, the praxis of professional disaster oriented social work is quite necessary in Zimbabwe. It is important to note that, the configuration of disaster social work in professional practice does not entail the dismantling of the current master social work lens rather a consideration of holistic practice. Several scholars (e.g. Gray & Coates, 2015:509; Irvani & Parast, 2014; Mathbor, 2007; Pyles, 2017:630) consider the role of social work in regards to disaster management work as indispensable to achieve the principle of environmental justice. This notion is echoed by Muzingili (2018:11) who argues that "the polemics of environmental justice and social work practice are closely coupled in contemporary society". However, in Zimbabwe, the concept of disaster social work is relatively unknown. The Civil Protection Act (Chapter 10:06) remains the main piece of legislation governing disaster oriented work in Zimbabwe. While, NemaKonde and Niekierk (2017) note that the usage of disaster risk reduction frameworks in countries all across Southern Africa Development Committee (SADC) is gaining momentum, its percolation in social work practice is somewhat secluded. Though largely proactive in nature disaster response in Zimbabwe is mostly reactive and remedial (Belle et al, 2017). This paper calls for the inclusion of praxis of professional disaster oriented social work in professional practice in Zimbabwe.

OVERVIEW OF DISASTER SOCIAL WORK

In spite of different trajectories of professional development social work has consistently been faced with neo-liberal economic ideals that insatiably value unlimited economic growth and unsustainable extraction of natural resources (Dominelli, 2013; Gray & Coates, 2015). These ideals have contributed to climatic volatility and the exacerbation of disaster risk. Literature testifies that the social work profession has long been involved with disaster relief both through the profession's roots in the provision of wartime relief and its concern with the physical environment of people (Bhaiseni, 2017; Dominelli & Ku, 2017; Morales & Sheafor, 2010; Muzingili, 2018). Based on this normative background the ontological and epistemological significance of the profession is grounded on its versatility in attending to societal needs. Defined conceptually, disaster social work involves the practice of social work in the face of natural disasters which have the potential to cause harm to people and animals, damage to property, livelihoods as well as the ecosystem (Pyles, 2017). A number of scholars (Gray & Coates, 2015; Mpambela & Mabvurira, 2017; Muzingili, 2018) observe that the impact of natural disasters on vulnerable people across the globe is now a major threat to humanity. In this essence, social worker as a precursor to the principle of social justice has been invisible in disaster discourse especially in Zimbabwe. While academic research and public debates pertaining social work and environmental justice are incessantly getting recognition in Zimbabwe (see for example, Matebeni & Ndapi, 2016:40; Muzingili, 2018; Zvomuya, 2017), the unique concept of disaster oriented social work remains in obscurity in the country. The reasons for limited involvement of social work in environmental crisis are numerous; rigid social work education curriculum (Muzingili, 2016:35), overemphasis of environmental issues to natural sciences (Mathende and Ndapi, 2016); failure of the social work

profession to assert its identity in society (Dominelli, 2012; Muzingili, 2017), and over indulgence of profession on neoliberal social welfare system (Muchacha & Mtetwa, 2016).

It is incontestable that the unsympathetic impact of natural disasters such as floods, droughts, earthquakes, tsunamis amongst others has indelible impact on vulnerable people in the society. Muzingili (2016:31) believe that natural disasters, if not well managed, strengthen the existence of environmental injustice as has its negative antecedents on social and economic lives of people. The argument is that, the justice being sought by disaster management dictum is threefold: equity in the distribution of environmental risk, recognition of the diversity of the participants and experiences in affected communities, and participation in the political processes which create and manage environmental policy. Recognition and participation are precondition features of social work and resonate upon the professional ethos which entails respect and worth of the individual. Natural disasters impact depressingly on service provision and its consequences undermine access to social services such as health, education, food, water and sanitation and others. The foregoing argument is in congruence with salient themes of versatile approach in social work which calls professionals to understand dynamics in people's interaction with their environment. However, with the advent of unprecedented natural disasters in Zimbabwe and the world over, it is being made clearly evident that social work, as a profession has a huge role to play in disaster management.

A number of scholars (e.g. Mathendea & Ndapib, 2016:40; Mpambela & Mabvurira, 2017:31) concur that, despite the role of social work in the lives of vulnerable people, the role of social work with regards to natural disasters is still dominated by professional elusiveness in many societies and social workers are seldom viewed as crucial players in managing disasters. Therefore, the dearth of literature in academia and slow inclusion of natural disaster particularly in social work professional practice was a major concern for this study. This paper also tries to narrow the wide chasm between social work and natural disasters by identifying the synergistic impact of Cyclone Dineo in Zimbabwe. The paper sought to address the gap by investigating the effectiveness of services provided by social welfare actors, the extent of impact among communities and challenges arising from these services provided to support the communities. The significance of the role of disaster social work before, during and post a natural disaster is undisputable (Iravani & Parast, 2014:94). Disaster social work mitigates the impacts of the damage caused by these disasters. This is mainly enforced through awareness campaigns warning people of the imminent danger. Early warning mechanisms ensure preparedness and reduce people's vulnerability to disasters. Most disasters have a traumatic aftermath for their victims and in such cases social workers offer crisis psychosocial support. Disaster social work also enhances the resilience of individuals and communities (Iravani & Parast, 2014). Social workers also carry out needs assessment during disasters which enable them to know how the different victims may be assisted. Embedded in epistemological eclecticism, social work possesses a wide knowledge of different service providers and link people with the necessary resource centers.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Study design and location

The study adopted both qualitative and quantitative design. Field work and data collection process was delimited to Tsholotsho district (Sipepa) in Matebeleland North province, Zimbabwe. The area was chosen because it is one of those places which were hit hard by natural disasters in Zimbabwe. This provided researchers a wide understanding disaster based experiences of survivors and the role of social work in the same situation.

Sampling techniques

The enquiry utilized both probability and non-probability purposive sampling method coupled by convenience sampling in order to locate and target respondents that met the criteria of the study. The totals of 65 participants were selected using community records and registers from Village Heads. This included 60 victims of cyclone Dineo and 5 five key informants in Sipepa area. Key informants were selected from Government Departments and Non-Governmental Organisations in the area using purposive sampling.

Data collection methods and research instruments

Quantitative data was collected using scale based questionnaire which focused on rating the impact of cyclone Dineo on various pillars of society and activities of various stakeholders who were involved in helping the survivors. Qualitative data was collected using in-depth interviews focusing on the impact and experiences of survivors during and post disaster period. The idea was to gather as much information as possible from persons who could comment on the effectiveness of support systems and intervention strategies that had been implemented to assist victims. Key informant interviews were conducted using key informant interview guide.

Ethical considerations

Willingness to participate and anonymity were considered important for the enquiry. Full debriefing was done and consent sought from respondents. It was essential that information captured accurately represented what was expressed by the respondents. It was also important that follow-up questions were not leading but rather sought clarification from respondents.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study assessed the impact of cyclone Dineo among different groups of people in the society. It also evaluated the extent of intervention provided by different actors in supporting the victims of Cyclone Dineo. The gist of this was to understand the level of social work interventions in disasters and quest for its readiness to deal with the same issues in the future.

Impact of Cyclone Dineo

The respondents (N=65) were asked to rate the impact of cyclone Dineo among the different groups in Tsholotsho to ascertain the level of vulnerability. The score were averaged and also converted into percentages.

Table impact of cyclone Dineo in Tsholotsho

Group	Rating (0-10) 0-less impact; 5-mid impact and 10-worst	Impact (%)	Summarised consequences
Children (0-18yrs)	9.8	98	School drop outs, Hunger, Deaths, Stress and trauma, diseases
Persons living with disabilities (all)	9	90	Mobility challenges, deaths, no access to basic services
Women (including girls)	9.3	93	School drop outs, Hunger, Deaths, Stress and trauma, diseases, sexual abuse,
Men (including boys)	8.4	84	Stress, hunger, homeless, famine
Elderly (aged 60+)	9	90	Deaths, Stress and trauma
Community	8.7	87	infrastructural destruction, Homeless, Droughts and famine, disease,

Source: Field data

Using a rating scale, the study revealed that women and children were largely affected when compared to other demographic groups in the society. Despite the fact that study did not use statistical illustrations such as; Chi-square, Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to understand the magnitude of vulnerability, respondents' ratings established that women, children, the elderly and persons with disability were affected by Cyclone Dineo. Findings by Nsingo (2017) reveal that children and women pay the high price of environmental disasters across the globe due to their fragile coping capacities in distressing situations. While scholars like Monico and Rotabi (2014) rightly argue that no one is immune to natural disasters; several scholars (e.g. Dominelli and Ku; 2017; Gautman, 2015:2; Iravani & Parasat, 2014:95) contend that women and children are the most vulnerable groups in the society during natural disasters. From the study, key informants admitted that the absence of robust child protection system during disasters affected children in Tsholotsho district during Cyclone Dineo. The situation was severe for those children and individuals living with disabilities. In contrast, the findings in other environmentally displaced districts, like Tokwe Mukosi in Zimbabwe revealed that women (including girls) were incessantly exposed to verbal and sexual abuse at the hands of fellow victims or authorities (Marungwara, 2014:46). Incorporating disaster oriented social work may ensure that all people in the community are protected and get access to social services.

Natural disasters gravely affect socio economic development of the society. The study revealed that infrastructure such as roads, communication networks, clinics and schools were all grounded by the storm. Newsday 12 November (2017) reveals that Zimbabwean government needs more than 500 million US Dollars to revitalize new infrastructure after natural disasters that hit the country in 2016-2017 agricultural season. This means social workers have a clear role articulated in profession's aim in regards to social justice. Disaster social work requires that this be enforced in all elements of disaster oriented work from preparedness, mitigation, implementation and response. For example, reflective analysis research by Herlander et al (2013) revealed that natural disasters have intricate and overarching social, political, economic and technological impact which can derail country's development by 15-80%. Correspondingly, this has precipitous impact on the standard of living and so, often, it exacerbates poverty in the society.

Responses by various actors

The study also sought to establish the extent played by certain organisations or government departments' in pre, during and post disaster period. In the following table, participants were asked about how they appreciated the role played by each department and/or organisation by rating it out 10.

Table 2 Support system ratings

Support system	Ratings (0-worst, 5-average & 10-best)	Activities
Civil Protection Unit	8.1 (81%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rescuing • Building of temporary shelters • Coordinating with government line ministries • Awareness campaign
Security Services (army & police)	7.5 (75%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evacuating victims • Communing warning message
Social Welfare	4.4 (44%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counselling • Need assessment • Liaising with government ministries • Guiding donor interventions
Other government Departments/Ministries	5.8 (58%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource provision • Transport • Communication
NGOs	8.3 (83%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to basic services (food, health etc) • Financing government programmes • Need assessment
Individuals	4.9 (49%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to basic services
Faith Based Organisations	8.5 (85%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to basic services

Source: Field data

The respondents highlighted that NGOs and Civil Protection unit was crucial in service delivery particularly on issues pertaining to relief. Participants were also greatly conscious of systems that had been put in place, to coordinate relief and other services provided by Zimbabwe security Services. It was apparent from the study the role of social welfare was not visible compared to other support systems. One social welfare officer noted that:

“Social welfare participated in the rehabilitation of the victims through complementary role. We provided psychosocial support in form of counselling and networking with other stakeholders. Generally, the role of social welfare in disaster management is till limited in Zimbabwe due to lack education on the issue and belief that we are there to help people who visit our offices.”

The above sentiments depict the limited role of social welfare participation in disaster management system. The study further revealed that the role of social welfare officers was more prominent in the post disaster period. While Irvani and Parasat (2014) argue that during disaster period social work role cannot supersede the one of civil unit protection; scholars like (Muchacha et al., 2016:87; Muzingili, 2017) observe that ultra-belief in residualistic social welfare system has limited the conscious of social work profession in environmental crisis issues. The dominance of NGOs in the support of victims was vivid in Tsholotsho district. Notwithstanding the plausible role other government ministries in disaster management, Dorfman (2014) observes that dependence of donor services is more attributed to lack of robust resource system by the government and dependence syndrome which remain unbleached in most developing countries. Intersecting with other humanitarian assistance, disaster oriented social work can also emphasis on macro practice, and relevant international conventions, guidance, and international private law as long term disaster management systems.

The need for new disaster oriented social work framework

Incontrovertibly, social work can play an important and active role in managing disaster problems and needs during and after the disasters (Dominelli & Ku, 2017). Social work intervention can be done by social work administration and can be managed before, during and after disaster. From the study it was established that, in most of natural disasters, the immediate and short-term problems and needs are practical and technical. This has limited the role of social welfare officers in disaster management. Following the discussion during data collection, the following model is based on the four themes which social work can utilize in disaster management.

Phases	Definitions	Social work responsibilities
1 st Anticipative/pre-impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The stage of prediction or expectation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conscientize communities on impending disasters Planning on evacuation processes Empowering resource network
2 nd Impact/rescue stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The period when the disaster event takes place 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communication with rescue team Psychosocial support Advocacy
3 rd Relief/post impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stage of release and relief of suffering and the normalization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Psychosocial support Resource mobilization Resource distribution
4 th Rehabilitation/recovery phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The period in which disaster survivors are working toward restoration of their pre-disaster state 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Long term planning Networking Resource mobilization Advocacy Research

Source: Field data

The findings demonstrated that being prepared for disasters is yet another important role for social workers. While scholars (Gray & Coates, 2015; Iravani & Parast, 2014) suggest that social workers should help to lessen the harmful effects of disasters, in Zimbabwe social workers do not have an elaborative framework to guide the intervention processes during disasters. The above framework presupposes that social workers can ensure that communities be prepared for natural disasters in pre, during and post disaster period. Social workers can help communities be prepared by emphasizing community collaboration and coordination of social networks to make a comprehensive plan before a disaster strikes (Mathbour, 2007). In the context of disasters, social work should be a process that includes helping the emotionally and physically wounded while strengthening local communities. Zarkour and Harrell (2004) argue that, along with psychological help, social workers aim to help the public regain structure to their homes. In post disaster and recovery period, social workers need to focus on development issues in addition to the disaster.

In literature, scholars (see for example; Dominelli & Ku, 2017; Bhaiseni, 2017) contend that social workers should ensure that community members be the ones to restore their lives in order to heal psychologically and come to terms with the disaster that has occurred. In doing so, disaster oriented social worker practitioner must also have knowledge of the systems and institutions in the community in order to work within and against them as necessary. In contrast, Zarhour and Harell (2004) believe that large part of social worker role should be on clinical and research skills to assess emergent community needs, so that they can quickly assess the basic social services by incorporating equality and equity issues. As illustrated in the framework above, these kinds of assessments help social workers plan and organize their responses. In advocating for political theory of environmental crisis, Muzingili (2017) advise that social workers also need to formulate their approaches in a way that increases the self-determination of disaster survivors to ensure that the inherent principle of profession such as respect, recognition and participation are realised. This does not only uplift the value and dignity of the victims but it also ensure that social workers should provide appropriate professional services in public emergencies to the greatest extent possible.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Advocacy:** social workers should support participation in and advocates for programmes and policies that serve individuals and communities in the wake of disaster. These include the provision of mental health and social services to survivors in a context of normalization and empowerment, with sensitivity to the phases of disaster recovery and with understanding of the unique cultural features of the affected community and its populations
- **Professional training:** need to pay attention to the special and critical training, stress management, and support needs of disaster workers in all capacities, from administrative to field staff, and the need to respond to their circumstances as victims and survivors.
- **Social work education:** education of social workers and social work students in the specialized knowledge and methods of trauma response and critical incident stress debriefing is encouraged

- Research: the development of rigorous disaster research, especially intervention effectiveness and prevention strategies is important
- Inter-professional collaboration: the need to the develop or acquaint cadre of well-trained disaster oriented social work professionals committed to effective interdisciplinary and inter-organizational collaboration in disaster planning and disaster response, at both the administrative and direct services levels
- Community and stakeholder communication: the provision of accurate and effective public information on the normal stages of disaster reaction, functional coping methods, and strategies for accessing and successfully using the disaster assistance bureaucracy is needed.

CONCLUSION

Disaster oriented social work is somewhat anonymous in Zimbabwe but, of late, the impact of natural disasters in the country has taken unprecedented toll. The explication of disaster and its aftermath in the country testifies to the need for social workers to be involved in disaster management. Social work, in its various forms, including the profession's ethical ingenuity, addresses the multiple and complex transactions between people and their environments. Its mission is to enable all people to develop their full potential, enrich their lives, and prevent dysfunction. As demonstrated in the study, the consequences of natural disasters require social work in Zimbabwe to poses the panorama to be a leader in the development of disaster based policies to ensure that the country is safe for everyone. Social workers have the responsibility to not only become involved with communities suffering from imminent or current natural damages but to begin to change the ways in which their profession visions natural related calamities. While there is a growth in the awareness about environmental crisis, the topic is still under-acknowledged in the social work profession. It is, therefore, crucial for social workers, current and future, to start addressing natural related disasters endured by the individuals the profession serves.

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