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Loretta Pyles

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Community organizing for post-disaster social development

Locating social work

● Loretta Pyles

Social work interventions in disasters have focused on the variety of ways that such events affect individuals, families, organizations and communities. Areas of concern have included traumatic stress, resources for disadvantaged and vulnerable populations and co-ordination of various intervention systems (Zakour, 1996). Disaster practice is arguably a reflection of the mission of social work itself (Zakour, 1996). A core and often neglected element of disaster recovery has been the rebuilding and community development phase. A review of the literature showed that social work has been less involved in this phase than in traumatic stress intervention and the coordination of relief efforts.

Research shows that low-income and marginalized communities are likely to suffer a downward spiral of deterioration after a disaster (Morrow and Peacock, 1997). Sundet and Mermelstein (1996) analyzed the association between community characteristics before a disaster and the survival or failure after disaster of eight communities that experienced the Midwestern flood of 1993 in the USA. They found that high poverty rates in communities were associated with the failure to survive. Scholarly work on disasters in the Philippines, Turkey and other countries demonstrate similar results

Key words ● community development ● community organizing ● disaster ● Hurricane Katrina ● social development

(Allen, 2003; Ozerdem, 2003). Access to safe, affordable housing, clean environments, living-wage jobs and other aspects of social development are critical after a disaster for those most vulnerable to long-term effects (Holzer and Lerman, 2006; Zedlewski, 2006). Though social work is involved in psychosocial interventions in disasters, the profession has paid less attention to social development in post-disaster recovery.

Ozerdem (2003: 201) argues that disasters are sometimes the result of unresolved development challenges. He argues that 'sustainable development can reduce vulnerability by addressing the root causes of disasters and the lack of access to economic and political tools'. Because governmental agencies and urban planners are often the central actors in post-disaster rebuilding, it is important for citizens to be actively engaged in these political processes. As input from neighborhoods and disenfranchised populations is not often solicited by powerful organizations, it is necessary to mobilize and organize communities with the aim of influencing the socio-economic development process as well as the ongoing recovery efforts.

In the wake of the devastating flooding that followed Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in August 2005, community organization abounds. Individuals have mobilized around issues such as the right to return, access to housing, neighborhood planning, economic development and many other issues essential to socially just communities (Axel-Lute, 2006). Some of this organizing involves addressing and transforming racial and class inequities. To undertake these social development processes, new grassroots efforts have emerged, neighborhood associations have been revitalized and national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have appeared on the scene. This work is being conducted by both local citizens and professionals from prominent local and national organizations, such as the Association for Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) and the Pacific Institute for Community Organizing (PICO) (Axel-Lute, 2006).

In this article I seek to shed more light on the relevance of post-disaster community organizing to social development. Community organizing is a critical intervention in which social workers engage and is recognized as such by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW). The goals of community organizing, particularly neighborhood-based organizing, vary, but generally include forming groups; bringing about social justice;

obtaining, maintaining or restructuring power; developing alternative institutions; and maintaining or revitalizing neighborhoods (Fisher, 1994).

In this article I review the literature on post-disaster community practice, including community organizing and development, and consider some undertaken in New Orleans, and follow with an analysis of the implications for social work. I will argue that a lack of emphasis on community organizing in social work practice and education is a barrier to social development after a disaster.

Disasters and community practice

The literature on disaster response and recovery emphasizes several important components of social work practice, including mental health and community practice. Many have written about the role that social work has played in traumatic stress situations, so I address the literature on the community aspects of disaster intervention. The key areas of intervention that are community-focused are: disaster service coordination (Galambos, 2005; Robards et al., 2000); including informal organizations in the relief and recovery process (Harrell and Zakour, 2000); the role of community assessment in disaster recovery (Low et al., 2005; McNeil et al., 2006); and community-based participation in disaster management (Allen, 2003; Victoria, 2001). I summarize each of these areas, highlighting their importance in disaster recovery, while contrasting them with community organization, which has been neglected in the literature.

Robards et al. (2000) emphasize the importance of clarifying and accurately measuring interorganizational coordination in disaster intervention and research. They define coordination as 'the deliberate interdependence of socially recognized distinct units for a common purpose' (Robards et al., 2000: 43). Galambos (2005) states that an effective response to natural disasters should include interventions that incorporate clinical, research and community organization skills. However, like many writers on the subject, what she really means by community organization is the management and coordination of the response. The author is not referring to classical community organization that would seek to leverage the social strength of broad-based groups of disenfranchised people with the goal of transferring power, as articulated in the tradition of Alinsky (1971), for example. While such coordination is a vital component of the overall efficacy of relief efforts, it is

important to distinguish these notions from the post-disaster citizen-based community organizing that may emerge to address social development problems.

Some authors have defined the importance of informal organizations and self-help networks after disaster (Harrell and Zakour, 2000). Informal organizations are usually locally based and managed by volunteers, and may provide self-help or mutual aid. Formal organizational networks may overlook the important assets that indigenous volunteers bring. Thus, the inclusion of grassroots and informal organizations can increase citizens' participation in disaster responses, particularly in isolated or marginalized communities (Harrell and Zakour, 2000). The inclusion of such organizations can be empowering and improve access to services for such populations, but it should not be confused with concerted efforts to influence urban planning processes, change policies or confront government agencies.

There are several assessment and research tools that are used in disasters and complex emergencies that incorporate an understanding of local community knowledge and capacity-building. One such example is participatory rural appraisal (PRA), an action research tool that involves community members in defining and working to solve local concerns (Chambers, 1994). PRA has been particularly popular among international NGOs working in developing countries. Because the process can be empowering and lead to stronger levels of social capital in a community, it has the potential to inform community mobilization and social development efforts (Chambers, 1994). PRA is not in itself a community organizing or social development endeavor, and some authors have criticized it for its over-emphasis on localism and lack of recognition of the power imbalances that exist locally (Mohan and Stokke, 2000).

Other examples of community-oriented assessment strategies are the rapid community needs assessment (McNeil et al., 2006) and rapid ethnographic assessment procedures (REAP) (Low et al., 2005). Rapid community needs assessments are often used to assess public health and other needs of households after a disaster to inform response and recovery needs. McNeil et al. (2006) report on a study that utilized a random sampling technique to survey households in Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina. REAP is based on another method used in social development contexts, rapid rural appraisal (RRA). Both types of appraisals consist of multi-disciplinary research teams who use semi-structured interviews, expert interviews and community focus groups. Ethnographic

approaches provide a great deal of cultural information valuable for planning purposes. As research is always an important tool for community organizers, these are techniques that could play an integral part in a concerted organizing campaign.

One promising model that incorporates the principles of community mobilization and organization is community-based disaster management (CBDM). CBDM is a disaster recovery technique that attends to the important role of community healing and participation in disaster management (Victoria, 2001). This method attempts to correct the top-down approach that has failed to meet the needs of vulnerable populations and has ignored the potential of local resources and capacities (Victoria, 2001). Advocates of these community-based approaches believe that these are 'suitable mechanisms for grasping the dynamics and complexity of vulnerability, as manifested at the local level, for addressing vulnerability and strengthening local capacities' (Van den Eynde and Veno, 1999: 171). Some key elements of this approach that are relevant to post-disaster community organizing are as follows.

1. Participatory processes that include the most vulnerable members of society.
2. Strengthening the capacities of local communities.
3. Linking disaster and development issues.
4. Outsiders having a supportive, facilitating and catalytic role.

The philosophy of CBDM is certainly congruent with some of the philosophies of traditional grassroots community organizing: community basis; an emphasis on indigenous leadership; the inclusion of vulnerable populations; and focus on empowerment (Murphy and Cunningham, 2003). However, it is important to clarify that there are clearly differences between managing a disaster and organizing communities to advocate for policy and program changes related to community revitalization needs after a disaster. In addition, organizing after disasters must go beyond just including vulnerable members and focus activities on transforming the hegemonic structures and policies that perpetuate such injustice, if it is to address development problems and other inequities.

Community organizing in New Orleans

Within the weeks and months following Hurricane Katrina, government at all levels had convened special committees and created new

positions to address the recovery and rebuilding efforts of the Gulf coast. President Bush appointed a Federal Hurricane Recovery Coordinator. The governor of the State of Louisiana, Kathleen Blanco, created a planning and coordinating body called the Louisiana Recovery Authority. Mayor Ray Nagin of the City of New Orleans appointed a 17-member panel called the Bring New Orleans Back Commission. Other key players in the recovery process are the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the US Congress, the Louisiana state legislature, the New Orleans city planning commission, outside contractors hired to address planning and rebuilding issues, the federal housing authority and others. In addition, the New Orleans Community Support Foundation (NOCSF) is a private organization that is funded to coordinate the planning efforts of each of the neighborhood districts. The Community Support Organization (CSO) has been formed as an advisory committee to NOCSF to represent the various neighborhoods and city offices. The purpose of these systems is to create plans and policies, raise appropriate monies and implement programs to address the rebuilding efforts. All these entities are complex political and bureaucratic institutions with significant amounts of power relative to ordinary citizens. The systems are complex and in flux as new commissions and plans are proposed and modified regularly. As Vandeventer (2004: 3) observed, 'Elected representatives and government officials – unless they hear directly from citizens living in disaster areas – may simply assume they are doing the right thing'. One must ask who is holding government officials accountable for doing the right thing. This is where social workers and other grassroots community practitioners can be involved.

A contingent of trained community organizers and policy advocates is the group most capable of promoting the needs of marginalized citizens who are displaced or who have returned but are living in sub-standard conditions. The citizens of New Orleans are faced with barriers to safe, affordable housing, living-wage jobs and good schools for their children (Holzer and Lerman, 2006; Zedlewski, 2006). Organizers and advocates must have the knowledge and expertise in all relevant systems and institutions and know how to work within and sometimes against them. They must understand how policies are made and implemented, how to influence the process, how to craft their issues and how to recognize the limits of institutions, in addition to local cultural and historical factors that may influence such processes (Piven and Cloward, 1979; Sen, 2003). Furthermore, these organizers cannot replace the work

of grassroots citizens, but should know how to work side by side or in the background with the civic community.

Of course, there have been barriers to organization after Katrina. First, the people most affected were displaced, thus affecting their normal social networks. During the hurricane, communication was affected; cell phones were not working properly and land phone lines were non-functioning. Many people were (and still are) far removed from their local neighborhoods and their day-to-day interactions, which often provide the fuel for organizing in ways that we know work. The internet has become an important communication tool during the evacuation. I joined an online list that was started by a group of people who had evacuated to Baton Rouge, LA, calling themselves the Rebuilding Louisiana Coalition (RLC). Having a venue like this – to organize, share information, resources and ideas – was invaluable during the early days of evacuation. Second, people's lives have been in chaos. They are managing their own psychosocial needs and the bigger picture of community development may be difficult to fathom. They are grieving for loved ones, searching for housing and jobs, and dealing with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), homeowner's insurance, flood insurance and building contractors.

But there are conditions that work in one's favor when organizing after disaster as compared with organizing in non-disaster circumstances. Constituents and indigenous people who have survived have hit the depths of despair. They may be completely willing to evaluate their lives and consider what is important. Kieffer (1984) writes that a provocative event is needed for individual mobilization, an event of such magnitude that it offends people's personal integrity, their family or other self-interests. People may be willing to put it all on the line in a way that they would not normally be willing to do. In New Orleans, citizens were told by planners hired by the city that their neighborhoods would be turned to green space in the new redevelopment plan. Many of the people who were called to organize had never before engaged in community organizing, but the prospect that their homes and neighborhood would become green space was a big motivator. For the poorest citizens of New Orleans, living in almost entirely abandoned neighborhoods with no services has been the impetus to organize.

Another condition of organizing after disaster is that people are also open to what outsiders and the world may have to teach – professional organizers and city planners in particular. For example, the government was willing to look at what the Dutch experience of

building a sophisticated levee system may have to offer us. Local organizations and regular citizens have been amenable to the help that has been provided by development agencies, faith-based organizations and union organizers.

New Orleans is a city of many assets when it comes to the requirements of neighborhood-based organizing. These include a strong desire to preserve its cultural heritage and the strengths of its individual neighborhoods. The Neighborhoods' Planning Network is an example of grassroots organizing that addresses community development issues. Its mission is to provide 'a collaborative and inclusive citywide framework that will empower neighborhood groups to guide planning decisions made in New Orleans' (Neighborhoods' Planning Network, 2006). The first formal meeting of the organization was held around six months after Hurricane Katrina, though grassroots efforts to connect individuals and organizations had been happening since right after the storm. Within two months, over 220 neighborhood groups, 50 NGO-non-profit agencies, 30 churches, 25 media outlets and 25 universities had attended the weekly meetings. This powerful group is organizing itself and articulating its needs and concerns to appropriate parties such as the New Orleans Community Support Organization.

Another example of the power of organizing is manifested in the issue of voters' rights. When the governor of Louisiana postponed the elections until September 2006 because so many voters were still displaced, RLC put together voting rights litigation demanding an election earlier than that. They believed that any delay would result in rule by an unelected mayor, city council or sheriff, in effect a dictatorship. Parties involved in this litigation included the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights, the American Civil Liberties Union, other attorneys and a group of African-American plaintiffs, who represented the thousands of Black New Orleanians living in diaspora. Eventually, an agreement was negotiated on how to proceed with the election with the governor, the secretary of state and attorney-general. The state met all the timelines in the agreement and the Federal judge allowed the election to go forward. In the end, the number of voters was roughly equivalent to previous elections, an obvious success given that only about half of the citizens had returned to the city. About 25,000 mail-in and fax ballots were received and many evacuees were bussed in from out of state. This is a good example of the sophistication that such community organizing requires.

Another endeavor being organized by low-income housing authority tenants is the right to return to public housing facilities. Most of the facilities in New Orleans have not been reopened since Hurricane Katrina dispersed residents to places all over the country, despite the fact that some of them are still habitable. Local residents have been organizing themselves by attending housing-authority board meetings and advocating within the federal Housing and Urban Development Department (HUD).

Disasters, development and community organizing

If, as Ozerdem (2003) argues, disasters and their impacts are the result of unresolved development challenges, then disasters can provide new opportunities for development. 'This requires a development approach that is both sensitive to opportunity and able to respond by designing reconstruction programmes to incorporate such opportunities' (Ozerdem, 2003: 201). For example, one of the major industries in New Orleans is tourism, which has been very badly affected by Hurricane Katrina. The majority of jobs were service jobs in the hotel and restaurant industries. Many of these poorly paying jobs were filled by low-income and Black residents of New Orleans. As the city reconsiders its economic future, these inequities can be addressed and not perpetuated. Toward this end, the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), a voluntary federation of 53 national and international labor unions, has established a Gulf Coast Workforce Development Project to train workers for living-wage jobs in the construction industry. The project has the potential to build a stronger union presence in New Orleans and the Gulf coast region, while providing job skills training for residents wishing to return to the area. According to the UN Disaster Relief Organization (UNDRO) (1992: 202): 'Disasters often create a political and economic atmosphere wherein extensive changes can be made more rapidly than under normal circumstances . . . The collective will to take action is an advantage that should not be wasted.'

Research by Low et al. (2005) revealed an increase in community activism after the 9/11 disaster. Vandeventer (2004) emphasizes the importance of citizen-led organization and action in disaster recovery. These indigenous leaders 'come from every walk of life and live in every neighborhood. More often than not, they don't run for office or have high public profiles' (Vandeventer, 2004: 3). To what extent social workers have been involved in organizing

such citizens remains an unanswered empirical research question. There are definitely some social workers now engaged in community organizing in New Orleans. Based on my experience and literature review, I conjecture that most social workers are not doing this type of work. Most of it is being done by professional organizers and social development specialists.

There are several reasons why social work has not contributed significantly to post-disaster social development and organization. First, community organizing in social development issues may involve focused attention on macro-level phenomena, such as housing policy, urban planning and economic development. Their recent historic focus on micro-level issues means social workers are only rarely situated to address such issues (Specht and Courtney, 1996).

Second, notwithstanding social work departments that offer concentrations in community organizing, social work education is heavily focused on traditional human behavior theories, mental health and organizational administration. Social work education would need to focus more of its resources and attention on communities and their needs, policy advocacy and the group work skills that are necessary to build grassroots organizations.

Third, community organizing involves mobilizing oppressed constituencies, developing indigenous leadership and, as Alinsky (1971) argued, organizing 'yourself out of a job'. Social workers are not generally interested in making themselves redundant. A factor contributing to this is certainly the reality of what is fundable activity. Providing post-disaster counseling, including work with trauma and grief, is generally given priority because this is where money is available. It can be difficult to locate funding to organize oppressed communities around community development issues.

Implications and conclusion

Yanay and Benjamin (2005: 271) argue that 'social workers are the professionals best prepared to deal with complex situations resulting from an emergency', due to their unique roles and extended networks in communities. The role of social workers in disasters is a complex topic with multiple debates. Many argue that social workers should do relief work, including using their strengths to coordinate the often chaotic environment of disaster relief, working in the community and increasing access to resources for vulnerable populations. Others focus on the importance of social workers in traumatic stress and debriefing services.

If disasters reveal long-existing development problems, then it seems that disaster recovery ought to focus on addressing these underlying development problems, like poverty and racism. Yet social work tends to focus on increasing psychological functioning or increasing access to services. While healing and service provision are essential in the context of disasters, such activities do not necessarily address social change. Critical incident stress debriefing (CISD), a common mental health technique used in disaster situations, was developed originally as a way to quickly return soldiers to battle (Mitchell, 1983). This philosophy does not seem commensurate with the facilitation of social and economic justice. Though some areas of disaster practice are focused on the material well-being and social networks of disaster survivors, a justice-focused solution remains elusive.

Are social workers capable of filling the role of advocates and organizers? Is the profession interested in such a role for social workers? I believe that generally we are not currently equipped for or committed to such roles. A major shift in social work education would be necessary. The role of debriefing and trauma reduction is important. However, one must ask what evidence we have that this is what communities really need most (Specht and Courtney, 1996). By focusing our energy on stress debriefing and diagnosing post-traumatic stress disorder, are we perpetuating injustice by ignoring the larger development issues? Are we just sending the soldiers back into battle without trying to stop the war? I believe that much of the mental health work could be conducted by psychologists, leaving social workers to focus on service coordination and post-disaster organizing and development. Otherwise, we may fall short of realizing the professional ideals of social and economic justice by neglecting critical social development.

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Loretta Pyles is Assistant Professor at the Tulane University School of Social Work, 6823 St Charles Ave., New Orleans, LA 70118, USA.
[email: lorettapyles@yahoo.com]
