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The importance of social work roles in disaster risk management in Zimbabwe

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Abstract. This study was aimed at exploring the efficacy of social work roles in disaster risk management in Zimbabwe in the face of climatic changes. It was carried out in Binga district, Matebeleland-North province using the qualitative methodology and a case study design. The study sample was comprised of 8 practicing social workers. Snowballing and purposive sampling techniques were used to select these participants. Data were collected through in-depth interviews using an interview guide. Thematic content analysis was employed to analyze the collected data. It was found that social workers play essential roles before, during and after disasters. On disaster preparedness, it was established that social workers assume roles of educators, community workers and disaster planners. Moreover, it was found that they play the roles of case managers, administrators of social protection and counselors during the disaster response phase of disaster risk management. Subsequently they also act as advocates, development facilitators as well as monitoring and evaluation personnel in the disaster recovery phase. As per the findings, the study recommends that social workers be recognized as essential in disaster risk management at both policy and practice level. Further, there is need to enhance social work training education for flexibility and contextual application of social work knowledge in the field of disaster risk management for quality realization of green social work in Zimbabwe.

Keywords. Social work, Disaster risk management, Climate change, Zimbabwe

Introduction and background

In a world full of disasters and climate uncertainty, people are often under threat from various problems which eminent from their environments such as natural disasters. Taking this into account makes disaster risk management an essential part of humanitarian response in making sure disasters are prepared for, responded to and managed properly. The social work profession has a role to play in ensuring the welfare of communities even in the midst of disasters proffered by climatic changes. The question may be how the social work profession is involved. It is this work's contention to explore on the roles which are played by social workers in disaster risk management with particular reference to Zimbabwe. The study calls for the recognition of social workers as essential in disaster risk management as they have been for a long time offering key services which went unrecognized due to limited data which categorizes their work in that area of practice. Disaster risk management is a practice that involves various

stakeholders and practitioners. Elements of disaster risk management include disaster preparedness, disaster response as well as disaster recovery and reconstruction (Rapeli, 2017; Mavhura, 2020). Hence it is of paramount importance to denote various roles which are played by social workers during each phase of disaster risk management for effective practice and guidance.

Of late, the world has been experiencing a number of disasters owing to natural occurrences as a result of climatic changes particularly looking at hydro-meteorological disasters. This has led to the manifestation of tropical cyclones, droughts and floods. When these hit the human society, they present challenges such as social, loss of human life, economic and infrastructural interruptions as well as population displacements (Machimbidza, 2021). Looking at the limited recognition of social work as essential in environmental crisis, some of the reasons include the inflexibility of the social work education curriculum as noted by Muzingili (2016) and failure of the profession in claiming its ground in disaster risk management. Mhlanga et al, (2019) noted that disaster oriented social work is somewhat anonymous in Zimbabwe whilst however the impact of natural disasters in the country has presented extraordinary effects. They further transcribed that the occurrence of disasters and their aftermath in the country attests to the need for social workers to be involved in disaster management. Pylers (2017) expressed that disaster social work conceptually involves the practice of social work in the midst of natural occurrences such as climatic changes with possibilities of causing harm to people and affecting ecosystems as well as their livelihoods.

FEMA (2016) notes that there has been an average of 40% upsurge in disasters that have been declared federally in the United States for the past 15 years. However, in the Zimbabwean context, with a growing number of people facing various disasters in the country, it is fundamental for social work, as a people centered profession that everything is clear about the role social workers have in disaster planning, response, and recovery stages. Panoramically, social work as a profession has already played an important role in the disaster field in the United States, as many are informed, trained, and experienced in the basic skills necessary to respond (Bauwens and Naturale, 2017). The former scholars argue that this is evidenced by the fact that nearly half of the disaster mental health services, in the U.S.A., have been delivered by social workers affiliated to different organizations. Their participation involves the provision of clinical psychosocial support and advocacy services. A gap in the Zimbabwean context is that social workers are not adequately recognized as they execute their specialized roles in disaster risk management even though the country is facing a plethora of disasters.

Mpambela and Mabvurira (2017) agree that, even though social workers play key roles in the lives of vulnerable groups, their roles with regards to natural disasters are still subdued by professional elusiveness in many societies. They further expressed that social workers are rarely viewed as crucial players in managing disasters. As Zimbabwe is increasingly facing natural disasters, it is of essence that the roles played by social workers in disaster risk management are well articulated in respect of each phase of the process. Natural disasters are often dovetailed by social injustice, food insecurity and acute psychological problems such as post-traumatic stress disorders. In most cases, social workers are seen coordinating services among various stakeholders in ensuring that affected populations are catered for (Zvomuya, 2017; Machimbidza, 2018) which proves their importance in assisting disaster victims. However, it is relatively unclear to many as to which roles they play at particular phases of disaster risk management, a gap covered by this research.

The major employer of social workers in Zimbabwe, the Department of Social Development, formerly Department of Social Welfare is often involved in humanitarian

response activities in times of disasters. The roles which are played by social workers in the process are often bracketed as social welfare services thus undermining their inherent recognition as key multifaceted players in disaster risk management. It was thus critical to conduct a qualitative method-based study to explore on the efficacy of social work roles in disaster risk management for various stakeholders to acknowledge their essence in the entire process. Civil society organizations also participate credibly in humanitarian response towards disasters faced by various communities in complementing government efforts in ensuring that people are assisted during and after various natural phenomena. In that regard, it is important that the roles played by social workers who work under civil society organizations are recognized. This study will go a long way in informing social work students of their post-qualification roles in disaster social work. The study will also be important in categorizing various roles which can be assumed by social workers at all levels of disaster risk management for effective service delivery.

Methodology

Research methodology and design

The study made use of the qualitative methodology. This method was opted for because of its idealness in collecting quality evidence-based data from participants (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). A case study design was incorporated in the study to enable a detailed collection and presentation of data.

Study location

Data collection was done in Binga district in Matabeleland North province, Zimbabwe. The district is consistent with disasters such as droughts and floods hence an interesting area to study or reflect on the role of social work in disaster risk management in Zimbabwe. Natively known for its aridity and dryness leading to persistent droughts, Binga district has however been experiencing unpredictable high rainfall and flooding occurrences (Ndhlovu, 2020).

Population and sampling

The study population was made up of practicing social workers who are involved in disaster risk management in both governmental and non-governmental organizations. To this end, a total of 13 social workers formed the population. Purposive and snowballing sampling techniques were used in coming up with a study sample. The purposive technique was used to intentionally choose participants whilst the snowballing technique was used to enable the researchers to locate social workers who were involved in disaster risk management who were known by other participants. The sample was comprised of 8 participants who included 3 social workers from the Department of Social Development and 5 from civil society organizations in Binga district. The inclusion criterion was based on the social workers' involvement and participation in disaster risk management from micro to macro levels.

Data collection and analysis

Qualitatively, data was collected through the use of in-depth interviews utilizing an interview guide. The motive was to gain informed and diverse data from the participants in coming up with various roles they play in disaster risk management before, during and after disasters occur. Data were typically analyzed through following various stages of thematic content analysis professed by Creswell & Guetterman (2019) in coming up with well supported themes which appeared common in the data gathered.

Ethical considerations

Participants were informed in detail about the study before they agreed to take part in the research in a bid to uphold informed consent. Participants were told of their right to withdraw from the study anytime if they felt the need to do so. Non-maleficence and confidentiality were upheld to ensure the safety of all participants during and after the enquiry. Creswell & Guetterman (2019) assert that safety of participants should be a top priority in every research, thus the study upheld non-maleficence and confidentiality.

Findings and discussion

Disaster preparedness and prevention

Educators

It was found that social workers have a critical role to play as educators. The participants echoed that it is of paramount importance to educate communities about climate change and disasters. To effectively deliver this role, it was noted that social workers have to be aware of the communities they are working with in order to deliver information that is location oriented. Mhlanga et al (2019) propounded that disaster oriented social workers must be knowledgeable of the systems and institutions in the community for better education capacity. They additionally asserted that education is mainly enforced through awareness campaigns, warning people of the imminent danger of predicted natural disasters. One social worker commented that,

“It is important that social workers play the role of educators in disaster preparedness so that communities know of several effects which can come with various disasters so that they brace for anything...”

Another social worker added that,

“Knowledge is key in disaster preparedness because it makes people understand the possible impacts of a phenomenon and come up with probable measures.”

The above findings are supported by Mpambela and Mabvurira (2017) who posited that social workers have a significant role to play in educating and informing communities about the causes and effects of climate change-related disasters. It was commented that education by social workers include conveying information about circumstances which makes disasters such as drought manifest and how best the community can prepare in time even using indigenous knowledge systems. Social workers as educators in disaster management equip communities with relevant information pertaining to disasters which increases the level of awareness and preparedness as people will be fighting with a phenomenon which they are well informed about. This involves educating people about the dangers of settling in flood plains of rivers and dams to prevent loss of lives and properties to flooding occurrences.

Community workers

It was discovered that social workers play the role of community workers. As a key method in social work practice, community work involves working with communities in addressing shared problems. In disaster risk management context, it was found that as community workers, social workers can work with people in harnessing community resources to achieve resilience and disaster preparedness. Participants noted that in dealing with disasters such as drought, community workers assist people in embracing the traditional *Zunde raMambo* (King’s granary) concept where community members work together in growing crops which are collectively owned. As a measure of adaptive social protection, the produce is stored for relief during a disaster to ensure food security. This confirms the study by Machimbidza (2021) who argues that community workers assist communities in preventing disaster effects such as

food shortages through coming up with community food security measures such as collective farming. One participant expressed that,

“...through making sure that community resources are used for the benefit of the community, social workers can ensure disaster preparedness. This can promote food security and protection of families during and after disasters thus reducing community vulnerability.”

These findings are consistent with Dominelli & Ku (2017) who highlighted that social workers play significant roles in dealing with disasters which include mobilizing people to protect their future through community social work and proposing solutions to disaster threats. It was further noted that community work ensures community-based disaster risk management. This is an approach where communities are involved in disaster risk management at a local level; these include community assessment of hazards, vulnerability as well as mitigation capacities (UNDRR, 2020). Community workers involve community members to participate in understanding potential hazards as well as their capacities in responding to them.

Disaster Planners

The study uncovered disaster planning as an important role which can be assumed by social workers in disaster risk management under the disaster preparedness and prevention stage. Disaster preparedness is void without planning. From a social work perspective, respondents expressed that disasters come with various effects to human lives which requires proper planning. Mostly under a multi-disciplinary team, social workers compliment other professionals in preparing evacuation plans which take into account human rights and needs. In adding to the above capacities of disaster planners, one social worker noted that,

“Disaster planning involves coming up with disaster budgets which are aimed at preparing for challenges such as food shortages, child protection and vulnerabilities which come with climate related disasters such as droughts and floods.”

Respondents went on to comment that rather than just being concerned about issues of food security and evacuation, social workers take in account issues of child protection and social injustice when planning for disasters. It was contended that disasters come with various problems such as social injustice, discrimination and child abuse which cements the importance of social workers in disaster planning and preparedness. It was noted that disaster planners participate in crafting disaster risk management plans with goals and specific objectives of action which need to be taken before, during and after disasters which include resource allocation and responsible stakeholders. UNDRR (2020) avers that disaster plans involves the time frame and responsibility for implementation as well as sources of funding which makes everything transparent and feasible.

Disaster Response/relief Counselors

The study brought to light that social workers play the role of counselors when responding to disasters. People often face a number of social and psychological challenges in the face of disasters such as tropical cyclones, droughts and floods. In that regard, it was reported that social workers as counselors take the responsibility of providing counseling and psychosocial support to affected populations. Nyahunda et al, (2019) denote that the issue of climate change falls under the social work mandate, as it disproportionately affects marginalized populations and has substantial negative impacts on the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities. One participant commented that,

“As social workers we often render counseling services to disaster victims. One of the most vulnerable population groups which usually require counseling during and after disasters are children as they suffer more from post-traumatic stress disorders and anxiety as compared to adults”

These findings are complimented by Mhlanga et al, (2019) who expressed that most disasters have a traumatic aftermath for their victims and in such cases social workers offer crisis psychosocial support. Machimbidza (2018) commented that counseling and psychosocial support are crucial in disaster response as they assist in restoring human functioning and ensuring individual resilience to environmental circumstances. Participants noted that counseling services are largely provided by social workers from the Department of Social Development although they are short staffed. Their efforts are thus complimented by social workers attached with civil society organizations as they implement various programmes and projects.

Case managers

The study discovered that case management is important in assisting individuals, groups and communities during and after disasters. The study participants collectively expressed that case management makes disaster response systematic and effective. Disaster case management entails working with various stakeholders which include government departments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in meeting the needs of disaster affected victims. It provides a ground where various players come in and contribute services and resources in line with their capacities and responsibilities. A social worker from the Department of Social Development echoed the following,

“We are responsible for coordinating resources and services which are needed by communities affected by disasters. In our department we often coordinate with non-governmental organizations and GMB in responding to drought so as to provide food and financial assistance to families for sustenance through cash transfers.”

The participants further reported that they link people with resources. They maintained that children and families affected by drought and floods are referred to different organizations where they are assisted with issues such as food, school fees and medication. Linking individuals with resources is crucial in disaster response as it ensures that victims access services and resources they are in need of for effective relief.

Administrators of social protection

This study established that social workers have a crucial role in disaster risk reduction to play as administrators of social protection. Participants expressed that disasters expose various populations to vulnerabilities hence the need for social protection. Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler (2004) corroborated that social protection is concerned with protecting and helping those who are poor, vulnerable, marginalized or dealing with risks; of which all these come with disasters. It was thus brought to light that victims of disasters need social assistance considering that they would have faced shocks, vulnerability and marginalization. It is social workers' role to ensure the administration of social protection to affected members of a community. One social worker noted that,

“We frequently administer social protection through social assistance programmes such as the Drought Relief and the Harmonized Social Cash Transfer (HSCT) to vulnerable members of the society as a means of rejuvenating their socio-economic functioning during and after disasters.”

Another one added that,

“Social care as a component of social protection is critical during disasters because that’s when populations such as women and children face various forms of abuse and neglect; therefore as social workers we refer those clients to responsible service providers for assistance.”

The coordination of humanitarian interventions, disaster risk management and social protection is eminent in disaster response. It is the role of social workers to ensure vertical expansion of social protection that is through increasing the benefit value or duration of an existing programme for example, the Drought Relief Programme and some horizontal expansion of beneficiary coverage such as adding new beneficiaries to an existing programme. Social protection, climate change adaptation and disaster risk management wholly share the same stirring principle of seeking to mitigate risks, reduce vulnerability and build resilience to livelihood shocks (Vincent & Cull, 2012); thus pinpointing the efficacy of social workers.

Disaster Recovery

Advocates

The findings demonstrated that advocacy is imperative in the disaster recovery phase. The participants echoed that disasters are habitually accompanied by devastating effects on human lives such as poor access to basic services and discrimination. Disasters often make disadvantaged members of the society more vulnerable and marginalized thus worsening their situation (Machimbidza, 2021). To clearly understand the role of social workers in dealing with social justice and human rights violations, one participant noted that,

“We advocate for disaster victims to be treated in an equal and just manner. Because, disaster affected individuals are more vulnerable to discrimination as well as social and economic injustice, it is our responsibility as social workers to see to it that they have access to resources and services they need without prejudice.”

Mhlanga et al, (2019) noted that natural disasters impact depressingly on service provision and the consequences undermine access to basic services such as health, education, food, water and sanitation, which exposes the vulnerable to injustice. Social work has an acute role to play in mainstreaming human rights and social justice issues to the limits when it comes to climate change and environmental disasters. Nyahunda et al, (2019) found that most social workers use their social justice skills to deal with several issues of injustice by stimulating equal distribution of resources and advocating for social change during and after droughts.

Monitoring and Evaluation Officers

Crucially after the occurrence of a disaster, there is need to monitor and evaluate efforts which were made at the preparation and response stages. In that regard, this study established that social workers have a role to play in monitoring and evaluating all the efforts laid in trying to curb the effects of climatic extremes or disasters. As social workers are involved in disaster risk management as educators and planners at the initial stage, it is important that they monitor the effectiveness of their plans as to whether they are/went in accordance to the blueprint or not. They also evaluate whether programmes initiated in preparation of or during the disaster such as the Drought Relief have served their initial purposes or they failed. Their role in evaluation also include assessing the extent to which the planned and responsive measures have benefited the larger population affected by a disaster in order to initiate changes or amendments if need be, and as well feed into future planning of similar occurrences. In other words, social workers

play the role of researchers through collecting various forms of data which they can use to influence changes from project to policy levels.

Development facilitators

This study came to an establishment that social workers play the role of development facilitators in the recovery phase. In this regard, it was echoed that social workers who work under non-governmental organizations facilitate grants and fundraisings which are aimed at helping victims after disasters. Participants from civil society organizations corroborated that they facilitate community development projects such as market gardening and fisheries. For the purpose of long-term development investment, social workers' objective is to invest in people so that they can be able to take care of themselves especially after disasters which affect their socio-economic livelihoods (Machimbidza, 2018). Social workers who work under the Department of Social Development facilitate the Internal Savings and Lending (ISALs) programme which is aimed at capacitating women with savings opportunities thus overcoming vulnerability and poverty in the face of disasters such as droughts. These savings clubs in rural areas have positively and resoundingly improved women's economic empowerment; increased their access to business capital for micro-enterprise activities and improved household resilience to shocks such as food insecurity and malnutrition.

Conclusion

Climate related disasters are ravaging developing countries leaving rural communities suffering from vulnerabilities and shocks. Social work as a welfare and development profession has a key role to play in assisting such communities. Disaster risk management is entirely a process which seeks to lessen and somehow prevent acute effects of disasters such as tropical cyclones, droughts and floods to the human society. Therefore, it was this work's intention to discover and categorize various roles which are played by social workers in disaster risk management in the preparation, response and recovery phases. The study found that they are involved in disaster planning, education and community work in the preparation phase. In the succeeding phase, they assume roles of administering social protection as well as providing counseling to disaster victims. Moreover in assisting communities to recover from the wounds of disasters, social workers are involved in advocating for social justice and human rights as well as facilitating developmental activities. After discovering these indispensable roles, the authors thus call for the critical recognition of social workers as invaluable in disaster risk management in Zimbabwe for their work is illustrious towards promoting, safeguarding and restoring positive human functioning in the face of disasters.

Recommendations

1. Like other disaster related professionals, social workers have to be recognized as essential in disaster risk management. This will enable them to assume various roles in their capacity with integrity.
2. More research is required in disaster risk management aligned to social work in order to develop evidence-based green social work practice.
3. There is need for enhanced training for social workers on disaster risk management. This includes intensive training on social work in emergencies with particular reference to trauma services, child protection, development restructuring and inter-professional collaborations. This expertise will enable social workers to be outstanding and distinctive in the field of disaster risk management.

4. Social workers are encouraged to enhance their expertise through continuous professional development so as to gain in-depth or specialized knowledge for them to be influential in their areas of practice and as well promote the image of the social work profession.

5. There is need to develop a more adaptive social protection system which include, but not limited to, designing flexible and scalable programmes, making sure the support provided reduces existing as well as future vulnerability. This involves putting in place targeting, financing and coordination mechanisms that facilitate comprehensive responses to different types of disasters thus promoting the role of social work in disaster risk management.

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