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Grappling with power and inequality in humanitarian interventions

In June 2014, the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reported that the number of international refugees had exceeded 50 million, the highest number since the Second World War. This reflects the proliferation of crises resulting from war, state repression, natural disasters and poverty, which also affect the many millions more who stay behind in those situations from which refugees flee. Given social work's commitment to social justice and human rights, it is unsurprising that social workers frequently play a key role in responding, although until quite recently they have often been missing from the literature and their contribution to policy and practice in humanitarian interventions globally is often uncoordinated and inconsistent (Harding and Libal, 2012). Social workers intervene in many different ways, as demonstrated by the range of articles in this special issue, and they do so within contexts that are frequently power-laden, contested and chaotic.

'Disasters' may be both humanitarian and political. As many of the contributors to this Special Issue point out, even in the case of natural events such as earthquakes or floods, it is social relations that influence how people are affected, physically, socially and psychologically, and how reconstruction or post-disaster development is conducted.

Disasters are also often inherently international, long before any post-disaster international intervention begins. States may be directly implicated in humanitarian crises in other countries through their military interventions or through support for one side or another in 'internal' conflicts. In other cases, humanitarian crises are sparked by natural events, but their actual impact on the lives of local people is shaped by their location within social structures. Contemporary capitalism involves international relations of exploitation and oppression (Vickers, 2012), which lead to extreme concentrations of poverty and weak state infrastructure in some countries that leave people particularly vulnerable.

Whatever their cause, humanitarian crises also create opportunities for multinational companies to profit through reconstruction and to reorganise local arrangements in their favour (Klein, 2008). Humanitarian crises can also provide a pretext for further intervention by imperialist states, as we have seen with the recent calls for military intervention in Libya under the pretext of stopping migrants from drowning (Vickers, 2015).

It is in this highly political and contested field that social workers intervene, often driven by a mission of human rights and a commitment to listen to local voices and needs but nevertheless embedded in the huge inequalities of wealth and power, within and between countries, which arise from imperialist capitalism. Often social workers intervene from a position of power, and even where they are conscious of this and are committed to critical, anti-oppressive, locality-specific or indigenous ways of working, the dire urgency and the chaos of humanitarian crises can make such approaches difficult to implement.

Loretta Pyles addresses the implications of local and international power relations directly in her article about Participatory Action Research (PAR) by an American and Haitian research team

connected to a peasant-led non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Haiti, following the 2010 earthquake. Pyles describes the particular postcolonial context of Haiti that gives International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) such power, yet at the same time the country's powerful movements for liberation and social change. The article provides many important reflections on the potential for PAR to help us grapple with international power relations at a micro and interpersonal level, but also the challenges and dilemmas involved in such work.

The work Pyles describes was built on partnerships that pre-dated the 2010 earthquake, and these enabled a level of trust and understanding that was invaluable. Similarly, Jeannette Wyatt and Paula Silver's article discusses an initiative that involved staff and students from the United States who were already in China as part of an intercultural student exchange programme at the time of the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan. Following the earthquake, they worked with two Chinese universities and a business funder to develop a training programme that used video conferencing to support clinical interventions with survivors. They detail the curriculum that was used and reflect on the challenges of delivery across long distances within a short timescale, and argue that such technologies can be an effective way to deliver expertise and resources from outside the area directly affected by the disaster.

Lena Dominelli's article in this issue also focuses on international partnerships involving university staff and students, drawing on research that compared two initiatives operating in the south of Sri Lanka since the 2004 tsunami. She emphasises the value that people affected by this disaster placed on reciprocal exchanges with international volunteers and long-term relationships that extended beyond the immediate reconstruction period. Dominelli also explores the distinctive contribution that social workers can make in negotiating international and local power relations to improve the allocation of resources to meet people's needs, and argues for greater engagement between the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the social work profession.

International divides that impact humanitarian interventions may be cultural as well as material. Ephrat Huss, Roni Kaufman, Amos Avgar and Eytan Shouker present arts-based methods as a way of improving communication between international social workers and local people, in situations that may be both unfamiliar and chaotic. They suggest that by beginning with local artistic practices and engaging with these, social workers from other countries can improve intercultural understanding and thus help tailor interventions to local needs and ways of seeing and doing. In the case they report from eastern Sri Lanka, taking local artistic practices seriously also led to a destabilisation of the 'expert' position from which the authors began the project and taught them new ways in which artistic activities can support rehabilitation.

Patterns of inequality, and their implications for humanitarian interventions, are a recurring theme throughout the Special Issue. While the aforementioned authors explore international divides, Fardin Alipour, Hamidreza Khankeh, Husain Fekrazad, Mohammad Kamali, Hassan Rafiey and Shokoufeh Ahmadi focus on inequalities within a single country. Their discussion of the 2012 East Azerbaijan earthquakes in Iran argues that a narrow focus on physical reconstruction by the government, to the exclusion of social rehabilitation, intensified patterns of inequality and social exclusion that pre-dated the disaster, while people in the affected areas also suffered long-term uncertainty and disruption of social roles and livelihoods. They report resentment among local people concerning a lack of consultation over the rebuilding of homes, which failed to account for local conditions, ignored local strengths and allocated resources unfairly.

Manish Jha's article on the humanitarian response to floods in Bihar, India, in 2008, refutes the 'accidental' character of disasters and argues that the impact of the floods on different sections of society was directly connected to the socio-political structure of the state and its interventions to shape the natural environment, interacting with the particular history of caste-based violence in the region. He reports that wealth, caste, age and gender all contributed to determining who was rescued first and, for those who survived, the share of material aid they received. Jha reports how social workers responded to these problems through community organising and education, involving

members of excluded castes in analysing patterns of discrimination and planning the distribution of aid in a more inclusive way, building their confidence to make demands on the state.

While humanitarian interventions respond in these cases to a specific, time-limited event, they may also result from longer-running crises. In a powerful example of this, Patrick O'Leary, Aisha Hutchinson and Jason Squire discuss the situation of Palestinian refugee children in Lebanon. They describe a context where forced displacement combines with repeated actual or threatened military action from Israel, unequal rights, and structural disadvantage and exclusion for Palestinians within Lebanon. The authors detail the methods they used to evaluate the effectiveness of an intervention by an INGO in strengthening hope, and thereby wellbeing, among children who had grown up in this context, as part of a child protection project.

In contrast to O'Leary et al.'s focus on professional intervention, the article in this issue by Grant Larson, Julie Drolet and Miriam Samuel explores the capacity of local grassroots actors to respond to humanitarian crises through the example of how self-help groups for women supported rehabilitation in Tamil Nadu in India following the 2004 tsunami. Their account highlights the ambiguities and contradictions within the self-help groups, with a tension between social justice and microcredit objectives informed by a neoliberal approach. They report evidence that participation in these groups made a difference to women's increased voice, access to training and banking services, and social equality between genders, but found little indication that they had impacted women's poverty. Furthermore, they report a continuation of older gender roles within the home despite these other changes, leading to an increased burden on women who are now expected to both perform all of the domestic labour and engage in economic activity outside the home.

Hok Bun Ku and Yu Na Ma's article connects back to many of the themes raised earlier in the issue. Like Pyles, the research Ku and Ma report uses a PAR approach, but this time within the Chinese context of the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan that is also discussed by Wyatt and Silver. Like Alipour et al., and many of the other authors in this issue, Ku and Ma are critical of government responses that focus on physical reconstruction to the neglect of social questions. Like Huss et al., Ku and Ma are concerned with the development of indigenous approaches, and like O'Leary et al., they propose hope and hopelessness as important factors in post-disaster outcomes. There are significant similarities between Larson et al.'s discussion of self-help groups in Tamil Nadu and Ku and Ma's account of women's embroidery groups in Sichuan, but also important differences – whereas the microfinance groups discussed by Larson et al. are implicitly informed by neoliberal ideas of individual responsibility, Ku and Ma report a different approach in Sichuan, based on a long-term alliance between rural and urban communities for mutual benefit outside the market, facilitated by a long-term engagement of social workers.

Taken together, the articles in this issue are indicative of the diverse range of roles played by social workers within humanitarian interventions in many different countries. More importantly, they show the important tools that social work offers to grapple with the questions of inequality and oppression that shape the meaning that disasters have for people's lives in the short- and long-term.

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