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# Decolonising Disaster Social Work: Environmental Justice and Community Participation

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## Abstract

Human behaviour, particularly the neo-liberal economic system that values unlimited growth and unsustainable extraction of natural resources, is contributing to climate volatility and exacerbating disaster risk. As such, social workers are increasingly called to work in disaster settings across the globe and collaborate with many actors, such as faith-based humanitarian organisations. Unfortunately, disaster interventions may perpetuate the values and practices of neo-liberalism, colonialism and oppression without careful consideration and action. In this article, the author discusses the environmental causes and consequences of disasters in relation to risk and vulnerability, offering a brief case study of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. This is followed by a discussion of the importance of community participation for sustainable disaster recovery. The author concludes with some specific recommendations for decolonising disaster social work practice.

**Keywords:** Disasters, decolonisation, faith-based organisations, climate change, environmental risk, sustainability

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## Introduction

The growing risk of environmental disasters across the planet (Pelling, 2003; Tierney, 2015) necessitates the engagement of many actors to offer relief, resources and diverse forms of support through the recovery process.

Because disasters are viewed by many as providing opportunities to ‘build back better’ (Pyles *et al.*, 2015), social workers need to create conditions for and to help facilitate individual and community resilience as well as social transformation. There is credible evidence that human behaviour, including a neo-liberal economic system that values unlimited growth and unsustainable extraction of natural resources, is contributing to climate volatility, while rapid urbanisation, other forms of environmental degradation and wealth disparity are increasing disaster risk (Dolcemascolo, 2004; Klein, 2014; Tierney, 2015). The International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) has acknowledged this reality, offering a policy statement on disasters that calls on social workers to make connections between disasters and climate change, as they work to decrease vulnerabilities and increase resilience (Dominelli, 2010). As such, the principles of sustainable disaster recovery, which emphasise environmental restoration and transformation, community participation and social equity, can serve as useful guidelines (Mathbor, 2007; Smith and Wenger, 2006).

And yet, even approaches that adopt notions of sustainable recovery and resilience, so prominent in the disaster scholarship and resonant with the values of social work, should be questioned. Tierney (2015) and others have argued that such frameworks tend to perpetuate a neo-liberal agenda of government abdication of responsibility and fixation on public–private partnerships, while emphasising individual responsibility for adapting to disasters (as opposed to changing the conditions that contribute to them). Others have argued that the humanitarian and development sectors’ fixation on local ‘participation’ in programmes often serve to mask or reinforce existing hegemonic relationships between outside actors and locals (Hickey and Mohan, 2004).

Of critical importance to the issue of disasters is the fact that there is aggravated risk for those living in locations that are geographically vulnerable, such as in the Global South, near coastlines, earthquake fault zones and low-lying areas (Wisner *et al.*, 2003). In addition, people who are poor and who tend to experience other forms of social exclusion in society, such as those living with disabilities, older adults and women, are at greater risk and more vulnerable to the impact of disasters (Enarson and Marrow, 1997; Wisner *et al.*, 2003). Thus, it is especially important that we consider these populations when preventing and intervening in disasters.

In the era of neo-liberal disaster management, which privileges the role of civil society, we find that one of the largest groups of actors that intervene in disasters are non-governmental organisations (NGOs), many of whom receive funding from nation states, supra-national organisations such as the World Bank and private donors. A key and growing subset of NGOs are religious and faith-based organisations. World Vision, for example, is one of the largest Christian relief and development organisations that operates in ninety-two countries with an

annual budget of \$1.6 billion (Petersen, 2010). Faith-based humanitarian organisations play critical roles in disaster relief and recovery efforts, alongside secular humanitarian aid workers, social workers (defined here as those with professional academic social work training) and NGO actors. However, like any actor in a disaster setting, when uninformed about the larger environmental, socio-political and economic issues that contribute to a disaster, in addition to ignorance about local culture and religious customs, such actors can create unintended consequences that can perpetuate hegemonic colonialist legacies and, in the end, vulnerability. The role that social workers can play in partnering with disaster survivors, faith-based groups and other vital actors in disasters, in ways that facilitate decolonisation and transformative disaster recovery, is largely unexplored and represents a gap in the social work literature.

In this article, I introduce the decolonising social work framework, followed by a discussion of three key dimensions of disasters and recovery that are relevant to social workers engaged in disaster contexts. I begin this discussion by addressing the environmental causes and consequences of disasters in relation to risk and vulnerability to disasters, fleshing out these ideas with a brief case study of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. I then discuss the landscape of disaster recovery public-private partnerships in disaster interventions and bring specific attention to faith-based organisations in disasters. This is followed by an analysis of the research on the role of community participation and social capital building in disaster contexts. Finally, I conclude with some specific recommendations for social workers operating in disaster settings.

## Decolonising social work

Neo-liberalism, a family of social and economic policies that values unlimited growth, deregulation, commodification and privatisation of social services, and an individualistic approach to social problems, is arguably part and parcel to the legacy of colonialism (Tierney, 2015). This is a legacy of 'progress', 'civilisation', exploitation of land and resources and expropriation of labour (Gray *et al.*, 2013). It is a legacy that negatively impacts the culture and social identities of indigenous people by imposing a European worldview on their bodies, minds and spirits. A prime example of this legacy is the forced boarding school system that took North American indigenous children away from their families, customs and language. In recent years, social work scholars have identified the ways that Western social work paradigms, research methods and practice approaches have perpetuated the (post) colonial project (e.g. Gray *et al.*, 2013).

This critique has become particularly relevant in social work's quest to internationalise its curriculum and practise focus with people from diverse cultures around the globe, including indigenous peoples (Razack, 2009).

Thus, a decolonising social work disrupts the discourse of ‘othering’, the hegemony of outsider-led social work interventions and research methodologies that privilege the Western gaze. It emphasises the strengths of local and indigenous people, including customs and communal traditions (Gray *et al.*, 2013).

As disaster social work practice is indeed a transnational enterprise embedded in the fabric of disaster capitalism and ‘non-profiteering’ (Schuller and Morales, 2012), the notion of decolonising disaster social work is especially apt. Such an approach seeks to deconstruct the economic and environmental values, policies and practices that tend to recur across disaster settings, in terms of both causes of and interventions in disasters. Relatedly, a critical, anti-oppressive lens is salient, particularly in relation to issues of race, class and gender (Dominelli, 2003). Finally, it is necessary to interrogate the terrain of partnership building between outsiders and local people, both in terms of its larger context and in terms of the ways in which its micro-processes play out in the field (Pyles, 2011).

## Disasters, environmental risk and vulnerability

Natural hazards are events such as hurricanes and earthquakes, while a disaster is a hazard that actually results in loss of human life. Disasters are often distinguished conceptually as either natural disasters that are caused by nature (e.g. a tornado) or as technological, namely human caused (e.g. an oil spill). The former are considered out of human control and the latter are considered within human control (Pelling, 2003). And yet there is really more complexity to understanding disasters than meets the eye. While one could say that nature’s fury caused Hurricane Katrina in the USA, it might be more correct to say that human-induced climate change was the cause. Even more explicit in this case was the failure of the US Army Corps of Engineers’ levee system that caused the majority of the damage, as massive flooding ensued (Burby, 2006). Of further relevance when understanding this particular disaster (and many others) is the fact that poor people of colour with limited resources experienced more of a disaster, namely greater loss and more challenges to recovery (Pyles, 2006). Thus, blaming nature as a causal story for the catastrophe reflects a limited understanding of the complexity at play. Furthermore, ‘it is to risk separating “natural” disasters from the social frameworks that influence how hazards affect people, thereby putting too much emphasis on the natural hazards themselves, and not nearly enough on the surrounding social environment’ (Wisner *et al.*, 2003, p. 4).

Thus, social geography and social location clearly play central roles in conceptualising disasters as well as understanding individual and community vulnerability to disasters. People who live in dangerous geographies

such as on an earthquake fault are, of course, most vulnerable to disasters. Vulnerabilities to disasters are also associated with climate-sensitive factors such as 'food supply, infrastructure, health, water resources, coastal systems, ecosystems, global biogeochemical cycles, ice sheets and modes of atmospheric circulation' (Schneider *et al.*, 2007, p. 781).

A growing body of research is linking extreme events, at least in part, to anthropogenic climate change (e.g. Klein, 2014; Schneider *et al.*, 2007). These impacts include loss of glaciers, increases in the frequency and/or intensity of extreme events and increases in the loss of human lives. Scientific evidence suggests that climate change has increased the risk of certain extreme events such as heatwaves and has likely contributed to the intensification of some tropical cyclones (Schneider *et al.*, 2007). Importantly, there is growing consensus in the scientific community that actions to mitigate climate change will reduce the risks associated with key vulnerabilities (Schneider *et al.*, 2007).

## The 2010 Haiti earthquake

The 2010 earthquake in Haiti is a case example of how to further understand the role of the environment (i.e. the natural world, and social and economic arrangements) in relation to risks and vulnerabilities to disaster. The Caribbean nation of Haiti has the dubious epithet of 'the poorest nation in the Western hemisphere' and has a human development index ranking of 161 out of 187 countries ranked (UNDP, 2013). Haiti's 'underdevelopment' can be attributed to a multitude of causes, including its history of European colonisation, centuries of exclusion from the global economy, an almost twenty-year occupation by the US military, post-colonial development and aid, and several decades of dictatorships (Farmer, 2011).

Prior to the devastating 7.0 magnitude earthquake that killed 200,000 people and left 1.5 million people homeless, the country was prone to experiencing tropical storms, hurricanes and floods. It was also (and still is) in the throes of extensive deforestation due to a variety of factors, including monocropping during the colonial plantation system years. Also, due to lack of alternatives, there is extensive peasant subsistent agriculture on sloping land and demand for charcoal from tree wood for cooking fuel (Farmer, 2011). One study has even shown that soil erosion, from hurricanes and possibly deforestation, triggered the fault slippage that caused the earthquake (Wdowinski, 2011). Overall, it is a high-risk nation geographically for natural hazards (especially hurricanes and floods) and, because of economic, social and environmental factors, its vulnerable people are at further risk of suffering devastating consequences from disasters.

The earthquake devastated most of the urban centre and environs of Port-au-Prince which is a city that has a high population density (a city built for 250,000 people that has a population of three million) and weak building codes, making people especially vulnerable and resulting in a catastrophic death toll (Schuller and Morales, 2012). At the height of the crisis, 1.5 million Haitians were living in internally displaced persons camps (Schuller, 2010). Consider that an earthquake of even higher magnitude (8.8) in Chile in the same year resulted in a little under 1,000 deaths—a reflection of the social arrangements there, manifested as better building codes and more reasonable population densities in cities.

The earthquake in Haiti had a devastating impact on livelihoods for people who were already poor and vulnerable. Failure to address livelihood recovery (e.g. replacing work tools or re-establishing markets) is a major impediment to disaster recovery, especially in the developing world, causing people to experience even worse conditions than before the disaster (UNDP, 2001). Research reveals that locales that are underdeveloped before a disaster are likely to experience a ‘downward spiral’ after a disaster (Ozerdem, 2003). In a study of three rural communities in Haiti about eighteen months after the earthquake, researchers asked residents what they believed their community would be like in five years; 56.7 per cent believed that their communities would be worse off than they currently are (i.e. only 43.3 per cent believed it would be better) (Pyles *et al.*, 2015). Indeed, six years after the earthquake, there is certainly progress in terms of cleanup, social recovery and new housing, but there are still many struggles including entrenched poverty, environmental destruction, unemployment, a cholera epidemic that emerged after the quake and political unrest (Jones, 2015). While the intentions to ‘build back better’ can provide hope, the social and natural environments play central roles in risk and vulnerability to experiencing disasters, the impact of disasters, recovery from disasters and resilience to future disasters.

## Responding to disasters

The media tend to focus on the immediate crisis of a disaster—known as the relief phase. The crisis frames focus on the devastation of an urban environment, maimed bodies and victims languishing as they wait for help (Pyles, 2015). As media attention wanes, less money and fewer resources tend to be allocated to the next phase of the process—disaster recovery and reconstruction (Martin, 2013). Disaster recovery, which can easily take ten years, is a process in which individuals and communities try to return to a sense of normalcy, but also try to reshape the environment in a more positive and equitable way (Gunewardena and Schuller, 2008).

It is important to note that one’s vision for recovery is most certainly related to one’s social location and relationship to the disaster. In the case of

Haiti, the Haitian government, foreign states and actors such as the World Bank tended to view recovery as an opportunity for macro economic development and better positioning for the country to compete in the global economy, whereas Haitian citizens wanted to improve their well-being and livelihoods (Pyles *et al.*, 2015). A growing body of inquiry and analysis on the phenomenon known as ‘disaster capitalism’ highlights the ways in which disasters tend to create opportunities for profiteering and privatisation of social programmes (Gunewardena and Schuller, 2008; Klein, 2007). Thus, it is imperative that social workers have the capacity to interrogate and counteract this kind of social production, including discourses, policies and practices, when working in disaster settings, posing the questions ‘Whose vision of recovery is it?’ and ‘Who benefits?’ (Pyles *et al.*, 2015).

Aid workers, social workers and other helpers coming into a disaster scene also put a strain on the local system, in terms of their own needs for food, water and housing, which compete with the needs of local survivors. Relatedly, their presence tends to inflate local prices, particularly for rent, which can price local survivors trying to find new housing out of the market. Disaster relief and recovery can have other unintended consequences such as when external food aid floods the scene and local farmers and other food vendors lose their markets (Oxfam America, 2010). The failure to purchase local products for aid distribution or to hire local people (e.g. doctors) can further negatively impact the local economy (Oxfam America, 2010).

Post-colonial humanitarian aid and development practice have tended to perpetuate an ‘othering’ of aid recipients (Haslam *et al.*, 2012). In the case of Haitians, humanitarians have portrayed them as having a ‘preference for dependency’, apathetic and uncooperative (Smith, 2001, p. 31). Relatedly, the media tends to favour a story about the heroic responders to disaster who are outsiders, whether it is military personnel, church groups, doctors, humanitarian aid groups, bringers of new technology or developers who promise to help rebuild, replicating a familiar theme of the ‘white man’s burden’ (Pyles *et al.*, 2015; Solnit, 2010).

Contrary to public perception, however, disaster survivors are the real first responders. For example, after the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, small groups of volunteer rescuers (who became known as ‘moles’) went into difficult places to try and rescue people from the rubble (Ride and Bretherton, 2011). After Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, when the city was flooded and food and water were not readily available, people with access to boats rescued people trapped in their homes, and groups of people who had been strangers formed small bands as they shared resources with each other, including food, water, diapers and cigarettes (Pyles *et al.*, 2008). Researchers have found that there are spontaneous and high levels of co-operation and other forms of pro-social behaviour that occur in disaster situations that do not tend to occur in other circumstances. The depth of community connection that can be cultivated in such liminal spaces, many times across vast social differences, has



been referred to as ‘a paradise built in hell’ (Solnit, 2010). One could argue that human strengths are accentuated and true human nature, one that is co-operative, not competitive, is revealed.

Nonetheless, local people *do* need help after disasters. The amount of money donated and the amount of aid delivered by humanitarian aid groups is impressive. The US government donated \$4.7 billion and the UK government donated \$1.8 billion for humanitarian emergencies in 2013 (Global Humanitarian Assistance, 2013). The UN plays a substantial role in disasters as the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) brings together major humanitarian agencies, both within and outside the UN (United Nations, 2015). While local and national governments also play important roles after disasters, it is civil society (both local and international groups) that plays the most significant roles, particularly non-governmental organisations and faith-based groups.

### *Faith-based organisations in disaster*

Faith-based organisations (FBOs) operating in disasters and development contexts are increasing in numbers, with Christian groups dominating and Muslim groups on the rise. Such groups represent about 10 per cent of all NGOs with consultative status with the UN’s Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) (Petersen, 2010). At the community level, local religious groups perform a significant amount of disaster relief and recovery work, and other forms of development work. The World Bank estimates that 50 per cent of all health and education services in sub-Saharan Africa are performed by FBOs (Petersen, 2010). There is also a growing interest in strengthening relationships between government and faith-based groups, which is, at least in part, a reflection of the growing neo-liberal privatisation of public services. Indeed, US funding for FBOs doubled from 2001 to 2005 and the UK Department for International Development’s seminar series, Faith and Development, hosted in co-operation with the Tony Blair Foundation, Islamic Relief, World Vision and Oxfam, is representative of such growing interest (Petersen, 2010).

Religious organisations and actors have essential functions in direct relief and recovery efforts after disasters. After Hurricane Katrina in 2005, churches became shelters, and religious congregations from across the country mobilised resources and people to help survivors in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. Also, many religiously based humanitarian aid groups and congregations offered vital supplies, such as food, water, medicine and shelter. In October 2005, roughly six weeks after Hurricane Katrina, 22 per cent of people in emergency shelters in Louisiana were housed by churches and faith-based organisations (Pipa, 2006).

In 2015, Christian groups such as World Help and Catholic Relief Services have provided medical assistance, hygiene, food and other

supplies after the devastating earthquake in Nepal. Some such groups take an approach that goes beyond the crisis and put their efforts into long-term recovery and rebuilding as well. For example, in Nepal, American Jewish World Service has stated that it will focus its efforts ‘on supporting community-based groups aiding survivors, helping to rebuild infrastructure and mitigate the effects of future natural disasters of this magnitude’ (Goyette, 2015).

Faith-based aid in disaster settings has also been highly contested and criticised (Pelupessy *et al.*, 2011). Some aid recipients in developing countries have referred to humanitarian aid as a ‘second colonization’ (Pelupessy *et al.*, 2011, p. 43). Indeed, it is important to remember that Western humanitarianism has its roots in both imperialism and religion, as Christianity and empire building are inextricably linked (Herlinger, 2013). In fact, secularised faith-based humanitarian aid, divorced from religion, is a relatively new phenomenon. In some cases, the problems that faith-based groups cause are perhaps a result of simple ignorance of local customs. For example, after the Indian Ocean tsunami in Indonesia, some Christian aid groups failed to understand Muslim religious and cultural customs in their aid practices when they asked women to sing and dance to non-traditional music. On the other hand, certain faith-based groups have been known to proselytise and tie aid to listening to sermons or other religious activities (Herlinger, 2013).

### *FBOs and environmental justice*

A decolonising disaster social work asks social workers to be willing to consider indigenous ways of understanding human relationships to the environment—a worldview that frames land, sea, flora and fauna to be an extension of spirit, and equal in value to human beings. To what extent, though, do disaster responders acknowledge any sort of connection, both philosophically and practically, between environmental transformation and disaster recovery? Caritas Internationalis, a confederation of 162 Catholic relief, development and social service organisations, has clear messages about the link between climate change, disasters and vulnerability in their discourse. They assert their use of disaster resistant, local building materials, local participation and disaster preparedness (Caritas, n.d.). On the other hand, a USA-based interfaith organisation called National Disaster Interfaiths Network, a resource network of FBOs working in disasters, makes no mention of environmental risk or related ideas on their website.

The website of Lutheran World Federation embraces disaster risk reduction and sustainable livelihoods, and recently has welcomed Pope Francis’s encouragement to tackle climate change (Lutheran World Federation, 2015). In 2015, Pope Francis issued a sweeping 180-page papal encyclical about climate change declaring that the planet needs to

phase out the use of fossil fuels and that nothing short of a cultural revolution will change things for the better. Stating that the Earth was beginning to resemble ‘a pile of filth’, he points out the relationship between climate change and disasters and draws attention to the role that the powerful and rich nations have had in creating the disaster at the expense of poor and vulnerable people. While the Pope avoided the topic of population control, he interpreted biblical teachings (usually relayed as humans having dominion over the Earth) as affirming the moral duty of humans to be *caretakers* of the Earth. He makes a poetic and poignant plea concerning human relationship to the Earth:

This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will . . . . This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor . . . . We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. *Gen 2:7*) . . . we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters (Francis, 2015, p. 1).

While more research on the subject of faith-based organisations’ perspectives and practices related to environmental risk, climate change and vulnerability to disasters is certainly needed, one can safely assume that there is a wide range of discourse and behaviours related to environmental risk and vulnerability in the FBO disaster scene. It is also important to keep in mind that there can be significant dissonance between the discourse of an organisation and their practices on the ground (Pyles, 2011; Pyles *et al.*, 2015).

## Social capital and community participation in disaster recovery

It is well documented that disasters tend to breed pro-social community behaviour, as mutual aid ensues, civic participation rates rise, social capital intensifies and new community organisations emerge in response (Blocker *et al.*, 1991; Solnit, 2010; Tierney, 2014). Citizens rescue total strangers trapped in buildings, neighbours help neighbours clean up rubble, displaced people create new temporary communities and community members come together to hold their leaders accountable (Solnit, 2010). All of this transpires at the same time as media may portray citizens as looters and rioters and governments send in military troops to maintain social control (Pyles *et al.*, 2015; Tierney, 2014).

### *Community participation in disaster recovery*

Local community participation, a core tenet of sustainable disaster recovery, continues to be a contested term both in the scholarly literature

and on the ground in the disaster and development fields (Pyles, 2011; Sliwinski, 2009). Research on the Indian Ocean tsunami found that the engagement of international actors with local capacities was most effective when it was built on local partnerships that existed before the disaster (Scheper *et al.*, n.d.). Local ownership, participation, accountability, cultural competency and transparency are core principles of the Humanitarian and Minimum Standards of the Sphere Project, the Red Cross Code of Conduct and the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative (Telford and Cosgrave, 2007).

As such, many NGOs have adopted the rhetoric of participation into their organisational messages; however, full participation of local actors in disaster and development projects is quite difficult to achieve (Schuller, 2007). There are several reasons that authentic participation is often elusive, not the least of which is that local people are often reeling from the effects of the disaster in their personal lives and struggling to rebuild. In the neo-liberal, post-colonial context, besides the development opportunities that investors and corporations tend to exploit in disaster settings, scholars have also identified the 'non-profitteering' of NGOs as a reality (Schuller and Morales, 2012, p. 77). In this vein, such outside actors tend to take a 'supply-driven' approach over a 'needs-driven' approach, often ignoring the needs that locals identify for their communities (Tadele and Manyena, 2009). International NGOs tend to prioritise accountability to their donors over local people (Pyles, 2011). And, in the case of FBOs, these groups often have a donor base that may embrace specific values with a religious agenda (Deardorff Miller, 2014). Furthermore, one can hear the resounding echoes of colonialism whereby Europeans believed they knew what local people needed to be lifted up out of destitution, ignorance and savagery (Haslam *et al.*, 2012).

Authentic participation requires practitioners to demonstrate cultural competence and to attend to contexts with more collectivist orientations, embracing cultural and religious mores in recovery programmes. After the genocides in Rwanda, local people reflected on their experience with Western mental health experts:

Their practice did not involve being outside in the sun where you begin to feel better. There was no music or drumming to get your blood flowing again ... so that the entire community could come together to try to lift you up and bring you back to joy. There was no acknowledgement of the depression as something invasive and external that could actually be cast out again. Instead they would take people one at a time into these dingy little rooms and have them sit around for an hour or so and talk about bad things that had happened to them. We had to ask them to leave (Solomon, 2014).

While some forms of trauma are highly individualised, disasters are a form of trauma that happens to an entire community, not dissimilar to

the collective traumatisation of indigenous people. Thus, interventions and healing practices geared toward the collective are necessary (Gray *et al.*, 2013). Thus, a decolonising disaster social work uses art, music, creativity and performance as critical interventions, facilitating not only individual healing and resilience, but also collective solidarity and meaning making (Saul, 2014; Tierney, 2014). Many disaster survivors find it helpful to have opportunities to share their stories of the disaster—their losses, their survival—to the public, through storytelling, music, theatre, as well as visual arts (Saul, 2014). This kind of storying and re-storying about experiences with a disaster, and the solidarity derived from it, can help to transform social conditions, as people speak truths and interrogate the neo-liberal and colonising discourses that perpetuate environmental risk and social disparity.

## Implications and recommendations

Social workers are being asked to engage more frequently and deeply in disaster relief and recovery settings, alongside a range of humanitarian actors, in ways that can transform existing social and environmental conditions. Thus, I offer some guidelines for practice and education, grounded in the preceding framework, literature review and analysis. I outline and explain three key recommendations, with attention to knowledge, values and skills that practitioners can cultivate toward the end of a decolonised disaster social work. Each of the recommendations is mutually reinforcing and the three areas combined are essential elements for promoting sustainable and transformative disaster recovery.

### *1. Take a critical and holistic approach to the intersections between capitalism, environmental destruction and disasters*

Canadian journalist Naomi Klein (2014) has clearly stated that, without a major shift from the ideology of market-based economics that emphasises extraction and growth, any efforts we make to impact climate change in favour of the Earth and humanity are likely to fail. This is a daunting prospect and thus such a premise may necessitate creating spaces and practices to deconstruct ideologies about global capitalism and imperialism, engage in grief and despair work about the environment and climate change, and help each other ‘to see with new eyes’ and cultivate ‘active hope’ (Macy and Johnstone, 2012).

These practices can begin early in the social work educational process. They require student social workers to be able to critically deconstruct media and policy discourses, as well as to engage with other parts of themselves often neglected in social work education, namely the emotions, body and spirit (Pyles and Adam, 2015; Coates, 2003). When

appropriate, this kind of work can also be connected to theology, religious scripture and spirituality, with the potential to further bolster resilience so that partnerships can flourish amongst individuals and groups of diverse spiritual and religious perspectives. Relatedly, [Yellow Bird \(2013\)](#) has discussed the idea of neurodecolonisation whereby practices such as traditional rituals and meditation can reshape the mind so that it is healthy, empowered and creative, bolstering resilience to failure, complacency and fear. This approach can be taken in communities that are targets of disaster interventions, as well as by social workers themselves.

Because disasters can present opportunities for livelihood rebuilding and the development of new economic solutions, social workers can help local disaster survivors build on old or create new livelihoods that are restorative and sustainable for the environment, such as reforestation, green housing, organic farming and eco-tourism ([Saarni, 2007](#)). Projects and processes that invite socially excluded communities, NGOs and government actors to address pre-disaster vulnerability, risk reduction and disaster preparedness are integral to this process ([Allen, 2006](#); [Mathbor, 2007](#)). In addition, when developers, corporations and other profiteers prey on vulnerable disaster-stricken communities, social workers can act in solidarity with victims, as well as to speak out against and resist disaster capitalism.

## *2. Do not replicate the past: disentangle post-colonialist humanitarian practices*

When humanitarian aid workers and social workers arrive on the scene in a disaster setting, particularly in the developing world, they are not arriving in a vacuum. The context is an historical social production of policies, discourses and practices ([Tierney, 2014](#)). Thus, competent social workers have a duty to learn about this social production and, when appropriate and possible, strive to undo it. A competent practitioner should research pre-colonialist, colonialist and post-colonialist legacies, in order to gain more understanding of local culture, religion, politics and economics. This may require grappling with power differentials and the subtle hegemonies that humanitarians and religious missionaries have perpetuated in the past. Acknowledging these histories and current realities, rather than pretending they do not exist, can be a productive way to build trust with local partners ([Pyles, 2015](#)). This process should also most certainly begin in the social work classroom. [Vickers and Dominelli \(2015\)](#) have advocated for social work education that is anti-oppressive and that helps students make connections to the larger global issues that shed light on the disaster context.

With many faith-based groups already working in Haiti before the disaster, religious groups flocked to Haiti in even greater numbers after

the 2010 earthquake. In my own and others' observations of these groups in Haiti, they have tended to bring excessive attention to themselves by engaging in public relations campaigns about their missions, wearing matching t-shirts to strengthen their own group identity, and identifying with their roles as heroic (often white) saviours (Lacey and Urbina, 2010). Social workers, grounded in social justice values, are well situated to counteract these ugly scenarios by educating faith-based actors about colonialist histories and post-colonialist humanitarian aid that may have been silenced.

### *3. Localise responses and centre community needs*

Participatory community needs assessments should be the first step in any kind of engagement process in disasters (Méheux *et al.*, 2010). Where pre-disaster partnerships do not exist, it is important to work within existing community structures, such as with community groups, neighbourhood associations and local religious congregations. Understanding the local context, including local politics and other dynamics that may marginalise certain groups from participation, is critical (Smith, 2001). Also, lessons learned and technologies garnered from previous disasters may not be relevant, as circumstances are 'highly localized' (Easthope and Mort, 2014, p. 141).

Disasters are experienced in relation to others in a community, so that interventions should take this same approach. Western disaster social work has tended to favour individually centred interventions over community-oriented ones (Pyles, 2007). Thus, culturally and spiritually competent social workers should also bear this in mind as collective meaning making through art, community and religious ritual, and group prayer can all serve as ways to bolster both individual and community resilience (Benson *et al.*, 2015).

## **Conclusion**

It is critical for social workers to understand the social, political, economic and environmental structures and arrangements that undergird the disaster context. Communities will have tremendous trouble recovering from a disaster when there is an incompetent or absent government, when disaster opportunists try to 're-develop' a community at the expense of local needs, and when NGOs fail to engage locals in developing and implementing recovery programmes. The same is true if 'building back better' ends up continuing to deplete finite natural resources and perpetuates the exploitation of vulnerable groups of people.

For disaster recovery to be transformative and sustainable, decolonising disaster social workers need to deconstruct social discourses, and



revision disaster social work practice in a way that centres the role of the social environment on vulnerability and recovery. All of this implies that social workers build on individual and community strengths, create spaces to reflect on the causes and consequences of disasters, offer opportunities for communities and individuals to vision what a new community could be like, and help develop skills and facilitate resource development to make essential changes.

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