Dominica – Tropical Storm Erika and its impacts

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Introduction

The Commonwealth of Dominica, the nature island of the Caribbean, is situated 15° 25’ N, 61° 20’ W of the equator, with a land area of 750 sq km, 47 km long, and 26 km wide. Its coastline is 148 km. The most mountainous of the Lesser Antilles, it experiences heavy rainfall. Dominica’s diverse physical habitats include nine active volcanoes, dense rainforest, hundreds of rivers, woodland and varied fauna and flora. There are natural resources of timber, hydropower and arable lands (CIA, 2016). The island has a sub-tropical climate and is prone to natural disasters having experienced earth tremors, volcanic eruptions, mudslides, floods, cyclones and ravages of hurricanes like Hurricane David in 1979 and Hurricane Maria in September 2017. The country’s population is 73,757 (CIA, 2016); 29 percent live below the poverty line; and 23 percent were unemployed in 2000 (CIA, 2016). A small population of indigenous people – the Kalinago, whose descendants predate European colonisation – live in their own territory on the northeast coast and are virtually the only survivors of the region’s first peoples (Crask, 2016).

Dominica was first settled by the Spanish, later the French and then the English. It attained political independence from Britain in 1978 (CIA, 2016) and is a member of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and Commonwealth of Nations. The main industries of Dominica are agriculture and tourism. The main exports are agricultural products including bananas, coffee, cocoa and citrus fruits. Dominica’s main environmental issues include deforestation, soil erosion, untreated sewage disposal, and pollution of the coastal zone by chemicals used in farming and the soap industry (The Commonwealth, 2017).

In August 2015, the weak 50 mph Tropical Storm Erika unexpectedly hit the island, dumped 380 mm of rain in seven hours, causing catastrophic mudslides and flooding. In its aftermath, hundreds of homes were destroyed and entire villages flattened. Erika left over 30 people dead and until Maria, a category 5 hurricane that recently devastated the island, Erika was regarded as the deadliest natural disaster to hit Dominica since Hurricane David in 1979. The total damage from Erika was around US$482.8 million. The country’s socio-economic development was set back approximately 20 years (Pash and Penny, 2016).

When social workers consider Dominica’s history of vulnerability to natural disasters, its physical size and characteristics as a nature island, source of peoples’ livelihoods and the social,
economic and psychological impact of disasters on the well-being of its people and communi-
ties, their strategic interventions must include a green social work perspective. Dominelli defines
green social work (GSW) as:

A form of holistic professional social work practice that focuses on: the interdependencies
among people; the social organisation of relationships between people and the flora and
fauna in their physical habitats; and the interaction between socio-economic and physical
environmental crises and interpersonal behaviour that undermine the well-being of human
beings on Planet Earth.

(2012: 25)

This chapter discusses the social, cultural, economic and political impact of Erika on the people
of Dominica. An example of post-disaster social work intervention in Dominica by the authors
is considered. It concludes with: lessons that might be useful for others building a GSW persp-
dective; theoretical and practice innovations relevant to individuals and communities post-disaster;
and questions that can be answered by further research.

Socio-cultural impacts of Tropical Storm Erika

The residents of Dominica were totally unprepared for Tropical Storm Erika. Its
death toll created a sense of loss for families and friends. The dead included persons
who drowned in the storm’s surge, rough seas, and fresh water floods alongside
those who died from causality effects including lightening, wind-related events, and
collapsing structures. Erika also left 574 persons homeless, and created a crisis of
unprecedented proportion in Dominica.

(Pash and Penny, 2016)

The Jungle Bay Resort, a popular tourist destination, sustained catastrophic damage from Erika’s
landslides and flooding (Raphael, 2015). Surrounding villages also suffered tremendous dam-
age. Petite Savanne had the greatest loss with the death of 20 persons. The survivors of Petite
Savanne were evacuated as the government declared the area unstable, and a disaster zone unfit
for residents (Dominica News Online, 2015). This devastated families through loss of commu-
nity life, culture and family support. Personal experiences of separation and loss were grave. Loss
of homes, loved ones and land space that supported their entire livelihoods intensified feelings
of hopelessness. Families were initially housed in shelters (schools designated for this purpose)
but later many displaced families were temporarily split up to provide adequate accommodation
elsewhere for all survivors. Other rural communities including Delices, Boetica and La Plaine
were affected. Petite Savanne, a community of about 750 residents, had 538 persons evacuated
in September 2015. Below, an 85-year-old resident expresses her views:

I don’t even know what to say. I am feeling very bad about the entire situation. I have cried
so much already. . . . Right now my heart is just pounding and I am afraid. . . . From where
I was living, I have never seen a landslide like that. . . . I now have to start all over again.
I don’t know where that will be. I will miss Petite Savanne, the unity, the koudmen, the
cultural aspects, the people. We all lived together as one, the bay-leaf, and the quietness in
the community.

(The Sun, 2015a, par. 3–8)
Bay-leaf is a popular spice and an export of Dominica. ‘Koudmen’ is a Creole term of French origin, meaning a ‘coupe de main’. One of the meanings in English is ‘a helping hand’. Koudmen helped to build Dominica and its communities in the past. During natural disasters community residents spontaneously lend a helping hand. Such practices are formidable in places where finances are deficient, as many receive help and are helped in return. In Dominica, Koudmen are the social glue that keeps communities together (Gabriel, 2015). The disruption of the community’s Koudmen support system compounded the sense of loss.

The Dominica Grammar School (DGS) near Bath Estate in Roseau, the capital, housed residents from Petite Savanne instead of admitting new students in September 2015. Residents included babies, teenagers, middle-aged people, fishermen, housewives and teachers – the displaced individuals of Petite Savanne for whom DGS became a new, temporary home (The Sun, 2015b). One survivor stated:

My house wasn’t damaged because I live lower down Petite Savanne. But next morning after the storm I went to help, looking for those buried, and helping families to cross over landslides to move them from the bad areas in case more rain fell.

(The Sun, 2015b, para. 8)

The Sun (2015b) reported that the number of persons in the shelter would change as family and friends (Koudmen) would house some people in their homes, demonstrating the community spirit of togetherness and ‘we-ness’ that exists among the people of Dominica.

Erika greatly impacted the socio-cultural environment of Dominica. The deaths, injuries, displacement, unemployment and grief will continue to impact the residents for months and years post-disaster. It is fortuitous that the informal networks built by community residents in Dominica proved to be a source of resilience and empowerment for survivors in the immediate aftermath of Erika. However, the government and its agencies must actively address the mental health of the people and their livelihoods as part of their disaster management and relief plans post-disaster. Social workers played a crucial role in crisis intervention post-Erika. However, with very limited social work resources not all residents received professional help. Dominelli (2012) suggests that in such situations social workers work alongside specific communities to promote their well-being. When one considers the direct interdependencies of human life, the natural environment, human relationships and well-being, the application of a GSW approach in working with affected individuals and communities in Dominica is underscored.

Economic and political impacts of Tropical Storm Erika

An architect’s view on Erika (The Sun 2015c) is that construction building practices in Dominica were compounded by a general lack of understanding of the vulnerability of housing stock to dangerous environmental conditions and contributed significantly to the havoc wreaked by Erika. The architect believes that the populace had forgotten lessons from Hurricane David’s destruction and recommendations for vulnerability assessments of all housing in Dominica. In his professional opinion, bad practices, specifically the widespread building of walls along river banks which narrowed waterways encroached dangerously on the natural courses of the rivers and worsened Erika’s impact. In many badly affected and other areas, people had constructed buildings much too close to rivers, and utility lines commonly passed under bridges. These utility lines blocked debris borne by the surging waters of rivers during the storm. The architect expressed concern about the destruction of bridges and concluded that Erika’s flood waters clearly mapped out Dominica’s flooding danger zones and water courses (The Sun, 2015c).
Estimated damages from Erika ranged up to US$500 million; about $1.35 billion Eastern Caribbean Currency (EC) (Pash and Penny, 2016). With a 2015–2016 national budget of $563 million EC, it was impossible for Dominica to cover the rebuilding costs post-disaster. The prime minister announced an estimated $612.7 million EC to repair the infrastructural damage, and a further $39.5 million EC to rebuild the country’s airport (Caribbean 360, 2016). This financial estimate excluded the rebuilding of Petite Savanne (James, 2015). The country needed to borrow money to help with reconstruction. However, one Dominican environmentalist noted that funding the reconstruction of the island post-Erika extended beyond aid-hunting and required judicious social planning that would take the country’s environment and topography into account (James, 2015).

After a natural disaster, the infrastructure requires urgent repairs to make roads, bridges and other services functional for daily living. The economy of Dominica will recover slowly because of its weak economic base and its strong dependence on tourism. Dominica, a small island developing state (SIDS), will require financial aid from local, regional and international sources to aid its economic recovery. Funding has been forthcoming to assist with reconstruction and recovery (Government of the Commonwealth of Dominica, 2015).

Socio-economic interventions that utilise a GSW approach as defined earlier are key in positioning Dominica to recover economically and socially from the effects of disasters such as Erika and empower the country and its people to prepare for future disasters. Social workers and other social planners must acknowledge that a people’s way of life is intertwined with the natural environment. Many of the vulnerabilities that can disrupt people’s lives in the event of a natural disaster exist in Dominica. These include poorly constructed bridges and roads, poor housing stock, inadequate drainage systems, buildings sited along river banks and foothills of mountains that increase susceptibility to flooding and landslides. Within poor, rural communities the livelihoods of people who are employed in sectors such as agriculture, tourism and fishing are greatly dependent on natural resources and environmental conditions. When these are disrupted their well-being is also directly affected. Fortunately, Dominica’s residents have resilient and empowering informal networks that served them well post-disaster. Dominelli (2012: 25) notes that ‘the interactions between socio-economic and environmental crises and interpersonal behaviours that undermine the well-being of human beings and planet earth’ are critical factors to be considered when using a GSW approach to interventions post-disaster. Efforts at rebuilding must also ensure social justice including the equal distribution of power and resources and conservation of the natural resources for enjoyment by all.

Social work intervention in Dominica post-disaster

Intervening in the aftermath of a disaster requires that social workers are trained and skilled to deal with the issues that survivors present (Rock and Corbin, 2007). Survivors are usually concerned about immediate or ongoing danger to the self, the safety and whereabouts of loved ones, and the loss of homes, jobs, personal property, pets, neighbourhoods and schools (James and Gilliland, 2013). Psychosocial counsellors including social workers need to be attuned to the traumatic experiences, immediate needs, coping strategies and resilience of survivors.

Following natural disasters in the Caribbean region, the mental health of those impacted is likely to be overlooked due to the scarcity of psychosocial professionals. However, psychosocial support is necessary to reduce the heightened feelings of anxiety of survivors. Failure to address adequately the negative psychological effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, panic attacks, acute stress disorder, and alcohol and substance abuse among survivors can be detrimental to their recovery if they adopt inappropriate coping strategies.
Erika’s devastation necessitated psychosocial help for survivors. A counselling team comprised of the authors visited Dominica to assist residents. The team aimed to provide psychosocial support to survivors who had suffered extreme trauma and losses due to the disaster and to work collaboratively with mental health professionals in Dominica to assess needs in disaster-affected communities.

Dominica has few psychosocial professionals who can provide psychosocial support to assist in recovery following a disaster. Rock and Corbin note that:

Disasters can have a severe impact on the socio-economic bases of small developing states with fragile economies such as those of the Caribbean. Many of these countries already lack an adequate public health infrastructure and structured emergency planning, efficient communication and transportation systems and the human and material resources to mitigate a major disaster and/or ensure recovery.

(2007: 383)

Erika disrupted transportation by air, sea and road. Residents accepted help from anyone willing to assist. The visiting social workers linked up with participating in-country psychosocial and mental health professionals, ‘and become incorporated into their aid services’ (Javidian, 2007: 242). The visiting team linked with a mental health team (doctors and nurses) from Dominica to tour affected areas. Ironically, on that day the mental health team was celebrating World Mental Health Day under the global theme, ‘Dignity in Mental Health: Recovery Happens’. The local mental health team had planned the tour and day’s events to begin their week’s activities. The joint team of visiting psychosocial professionals including social workers, a psychologist and mental health personnel from Dominica worked in groups and toured two communities: Colihaut and Coulibistrie. These were farming communities that were seriously impacted by Erika’s flooding and landslides. Team members spoke with survivors and heard from men, women, teenagers and children about the severity of their disaster experiences, current plight and needs. Many survivors shared heroic stories about their escape from flood waters. They credited this to being able to ‘think quickly on their feet’ (flight syndrome) (Dictionary.com, 2017). They narrated stories of damage to homes and property, and of how they were working assiduously to clean the mud from their homes and streets.

The 15-member team of visiting and local social workers and mental health personnel attended a church service at a local church in the community of Colihaut. Their church attendance served a dual purpose. It opened mental health week and church attendees talked about experiences post–Erika. One story focused on a family’s heroic escape from the flood waters and losing their home and possessions. However, neighbours and church members helped each other by providing food, shelter, clothing and comfort. The team observed that there was a difference in the way survivors fared post–disaster in the two communities. In Colihaut there was a community spirit that spoke to ‘we-ness’ with residents helping each other to reconstruct their lives post–disaster. However, in Coulibistre, residents were reconstructing their lives with limited informal social support as they awaited assistance from government officials. In both communities, many of the traumatised survivors voiced that they had developed a fear of rain. The team observed the devastation of property and listened to survivors as they recalled how they had lost loved ones, their homes, schools and businesses. Some survivors were farmers or worked in agriculture and felt displaced, having lost their crops, livestock and entire livelihoods.

Survivors also spoke of landslides, rivers that had overflowed their banks, resulting in tremendous flooding. The team also observed the ways in which the rivers had created new pathways and how giant-sized boulders from the mountains had been deposited downstream among...
remaining houses and structures. Some survivors expressed feelings of guilt because they had been praying for rain but instead floods came suddenly during the drought.

The Government of Dominica was actively spearheading the clean-up and rescue efforts and, according to residents, this provided some relief. The major problem that survivors in both communities highlighted during the tour was the lack of 'piped' running water and repairs to homes. Bottled water was insufficient, so they also used muddy water from nearby rivers for personal and household use. They boiled water for cooking to avoid contamination. Usage of muddy water was risky because while some residents bathed in the water upstream, others were using the same water for household purposes downstream. Given these observations and other data collected by the mental health team that toured the affected communities, it is clear that apart from psychosocial counselling, social work intervention using an environmental approach would have been most appropriate in assisting residents to rebuild their lives. This approach post-disaster must entail ensuring environmental justice for residents (Dominelli, 2012), through the preparation of displaced residents for relocation, counselling of residents grieving over their losses, advocacy for improved housing and safer location of communities, adequate supplies of clean drinking water on a daily basis for all residents, the cleaning up of the streams and rivers that flowed through the villages, and the proper reconstruction of roads and bridges.

**Spirituality, resilience, coping and mental health**

The importance of coping and maintaining good mental and physical health post-disaster to facilitate recovery must be emphasised. Many people in the Caribbean use spirituality to cope with adversity, build resilience and provide comfort. One of the churches in Roseau, the capital, organised a National Day of Prayer to reach out to disaster survivors. Members of the team attended this service. The visiting team also organised a visit to a guest house where male survivors were being housed and held a focus group with five young men from Petite Savanne, the community which had been declared an unsafe area by government. Its survivors had been removed from temporary shelters (schools) to live in guest houses in safer locations.

Building rapport and trust with the men was difficult, despite the team's warm and engaging presence, because team members were strangers. However, once rapport was established, the men shared their stories and spoke to the following:

- The sudden nature of the disaster. This caught them unprepared and they could save only their own lives.
- Loss of life of family members and friends. One survivor had just returned from a relative’s funeral. The body had been recently discovered. He had lost eight family members and witnessed his parents’ house being swept away with his parents inside. Their bodies were never found. He was physically hurt in the disaster and was still in shock.
- Their inability to or feelings of helplessness in being able to rescue relatives who had died resulted in feelings of extreme guilt. Separation of family members who were housed at different locations around the island post-disaster added to their pain and distress.
- Loss of livelihoods distressed the men who were farmers. Possible dangers prevented them from returning to their farms, but they felt idle and wanted to work. They reported feeling inadequate because they were unable to provide for themselves and family members. They felt ashamed to receive ‘handouts’ of food, personal items, toiletries, washing supplies and clean clothing. Their extreme feelings about the disaster revolved around being displaced and lacking control over their lives, producing an overall sense of helplessness and anomie among these young men. Some were withdrawn and others hurt, and angry about their
plight. These men, like other survivors, were in need of comfort, good mental health support and interventions to help them cope. Feelings of shock, uncertainty and fear prevailed among them. The sight, sounds, smells and experiences during the disaster remained vivid and they expressed fears about rain. The assessment of the counsellors was that the disaster undermined the men’s basic assumptions and beliefs about life and had created anxiety and helplessness among them. The intervention by the team aimed to reduce their feelings of helplessness and bring their irrational thoughts back to a state of equilibrium with cognitive reality.

‘Social work interventions in disaster have focused on the variety of ways that such events affect individuals, families, organizations and communities’ (Pyles, 2007: 321). In post-disaster situations, individuals generally grieve for the loss of loved ones and property and relive the experience. The men from Petite Savanne suffered traumatic stress due to the disaster and multiple losses. Their social and cultural identity was fractured. Their sense of safety, shaken belief in each other and trust in God deepened their feelings of loss and grief. Some appeared depressed, anxious, fearful and guilty. Others were angry and expressed hostility towards the government for what they felt was an inadequate response by the formal agencies. The disaster had suddenly plunged them into poverty with implications for their survival (Pyles, 2007) and mental well-being.

The delayed effects of Erika and slow recovery were evident in Dominica. The local mental health team expressed concern about comments circulated by the media that the island was undergoing recovery. They felt that the public needed to be educated about the signs of post-traumatic stress and signs of recovery post-disaster. At the time of the interventions by the team, survivors were still in the ‘honeymoon stage’ where they were receiving some support from both formal and informal sources. After this stage, survivors could either experience disillusionment or come to grips with the reality that loved ones had died and that disruptions to their lives could be permanent. Ongoing psychological support was recommended by the counselling team to ensure that residents impacted by the disaster received help in overcoming adjustment problems and to aid their recovery.

**Self-evaluation: lessons that might be useful for others**

**Useful lessons learned**

From the perspective of GSW the joint team learned that:

- To house families together post-disaster is good social work practice. People are social beings who need to maintain interpersonal relationships and interaction with others. The men in the focus group did not have the daily support of family members and friends, and this added to their distress.
- The team of counsellors from UWI spent only a short time with survivors many of whom needed ongoing psychosocial interventions from trained counsellors to meet their long-term human service needs and assist with recovery. It is difficult for transient professionals, few in number, to be part of survivors’ long-term goals and advocate for social justice for vulnerable groups and communities post-disaster. They lack knowledge about the resource base of the local social welfare, housing and bereavement services to which survivors may be referred.
• Dominicans have the cultural practice ‘Koudmen’ of people helping each other. The country is rich with natural resources – oceans, rivers, dense forest, rich soils, flora, fauna and wildlife – and many residents engage in agriculture and tourism, thus depending on the stability of the natural environment for their livelihoods. However, the ecology and typology of the country add to the vulnerability of the people during natural disasters. Thus, from a GSW perspective, social workers intervening in Dominica should focus on:

the interdependencies amongst people; the social organisation of relationships between people and the flora and fauna in their physical habitats; and the interactions between socio-economic and physical environmental crises and interpersonal behaviours that undermine the well-being of human beings . . . reform[ing] the socio-political and economic forces that have a deleterious impact upon the quality of life of the poor and marginalised populations, secure the policy changes and social transformation necessary for enhancing the well-being of people and the planet.

(Dominelli, 2012: 25)

• When countries have few resources, the psychosocial needs of survivors suffer due to the lack of professionals to provide psychological first aid and ongoing assistance to them. Dominica has a poorly resourced social service system to enable effective responses in times of disaster. There are few trained social workers in Dominica. Hence, Caribbean countries with larger numbers of trained social workers should create a team of social workers trained in culturally appropriate disaster management to respond to countries requiring post-disaster assistance. Shahar (1993) as cited in Javadian (2007: 343) notes that, ‘individual social workers need to strengthen their knowledge of the impact of disasters on the victims’ and a community’s capacity to respond during the post-disaster period’. Stronger links between the universities in the region and Small Island Developing States (SIDS) of the Caribbean are, therefore, underscored.

• Although the people of Dominica had previously experienced natural disasters, the loss of lives from Erika will remain forever etched in the minds of persons who suffered multiple losses. ‘Ironically, a country can never prepare enough for a disaster, particularly a natural disaster since it is often difficult to gauge, beforehand, the magnitude of destruction that may result’ (Rock and Corbin, 2007: 383–384).

Furthermore, many characteristics of poor countries which increase vulnerabilities among their citizens in times of disaster are present in Dominica. These include the social dimensions of ‘sub-standard housing, the precarious locations of the homes of poor people on flood plains and unstable hillsides, and poor response of badly managed bureaucracies to disaster relief efforts’ (Ehrenreich, 2001: 6).

Theory and practice innovations

Some practice innovations

Dewane (2011) states that social workers have a repertoire of skills necessary for intervention in natural disasters. These skills include critical analysis, knowledge of community mobilisation strategies, and an understanding of relationship-building and conflict resolution. Lovell and Johnson (1994: 200–203) also note that that ‘social work has a philosophy of equality, and a history of surmounting diversity to create common bonds’. Thus, ‘the profession is well-positioned
to bridge the gap between the natural and social environments’. When intervening following natural disasters, the use of social work approaches such as GSW which consider the natural environment and life spaces of survivors can have positive impact. Joseph (2017) agrees that the use of current social work community models can be adjusted to promote sustainable development. This entails building relations with communities, helping individuals to deepen their understanding of sustainable development, and assisting them to develop and work towards goals and objectives that lead towards improved economic, social and environmental outcomes.

Muldoon (2006) states that as the social work profession continues to work towards the equal and ethical treatment of all people, the fate of the natural environment is becoming increasingly significant. Dewane (2011) believes that the social work profession although governed by the ‘person-in-environment’ principle has long neglected the ‘environment-in-person’. He emphasises that the environment includes not only the social and economic but also the natural world. Dewane (2011) asserts that social work purports to use an ecological and systems approach to assist people with their problems. Yet, that ecology rarely takes into account the unhealthy and depleted natural world. In her view, the exclusion of the environment is no longer acceptable because it is the prime determinant of life. Hence, the deteriorating natural world must become part of social workers’ concern as advocated by green social workers (Dominelli, 2012).

**Theory and practice innovations: the green social work approach**

Older theoretical approaches such as ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1995) and the Life Model of social work practice (Gitterman and Germain, 2008) complement the GSW approach (Dominelli, 2012). These theories are also relevant to practice with populations affected by natural disasters.

**Ecological systems theory**

Bronfenbrenner’s (1995) ecological systems theory considers the microsystem which is concerned with the needs of individuals in their life space. It also considers the mesosystem, which serves as the interactive mechanism between components in the microsystem and the exosystem and which exposes the crises that clients experience in the wider social setting. The exosystem extends into the community and includes state or regional entities, while the macrosystem includes the national government; its agencies; national charitable, religious and benevolent organisations; the transportation system; and the culture of the people. The final system, the chronosystem, refers to the patterning of environmental events and transactions over the life span as well as social and historical circumstances that influence the individual, family, peers, co-workers and others. As the theory moves along a continuum from the microsystem to the chronosystem it involves transactions between and among individuals, groups and communities.

**The Life Model**

Dewane (2011) suggests that social workers revisit the Life Model by Gitterman and Germain (2008) which is a theoretical approach that incorporates the natural world by looking at the ‘problems-in-living’ and putting them in an all-inclusive environmental context. The Life Model recognises three areas of life space, namely, life transitions or crises, environmental pressures and maladaptive interpersonal relationships. Environmental pressure is seen as lack of resources for social and physical environments. This definition includes dwindling natural resources and unsustainable living conditions. Dewane (2011) believes that this model is a useful
lens for assessing the life transitions of individuals that constitute a crisis, and environmental pressures such as lack of resources, like pipe-borne water, clean water for personal consumption, disposal of waste and other factors that impinge on the daily living of persons. Dewane (2011) also suggests that social workers could use the Life Model as their overarching approach to practice with other specific theories such as the ecological systems theories. She emphasises that social work’s reliance on ‘systems’ thinking implies that change in one system can have a ripple effect in the others, and, therefore, the use of the Life Model as a meta-theory can impel social workers consistently to work to improve the natural world of clients/service users. Dewane (2011) further believes that the social work profession although favourable to the ‘person-in-environment’ principle has long neglected the ‘environment-in-person’ perspective – the environment referring not only to the social and economic conditions, but also to the natural world. Thus, GSW becomes a natural fit for work with clients/service users, particularly post-disaster, because this approach seeks to ‘reform the socio-economic and political forces that have a deleterious impact upon the quality of life of poor and marginalised populations, secure policy changes and social transformations necessary for enhancing the well-being of people and the planet today’ (Dominelli, 2012: 25).

Social workers in the Caribbean can use the GSW approach to help people and communities to function better in their life space before a disaster strikes and post-disaster. Social workers together with environmentalists and social planners must consider the impact of the environment on the lives of residents, pre- and post-disaster, and plan accordingly (Dominelli, 2012). As social workers intervene on a daily basis with communities they need to focus on the interplay between residents’ lives and the natural and (hu)man-made environments (Dominelli, 2012). Shahar (1993) as cited in Javadian (2007: 343) notes that, ‘individual social workers need to strengthen their knowledge of the impact of disasters on the victims’ and a community’s ‘capacity to respond during the post-disaster period’. Residents in farming communities must be helped to understand how their practices impact their lives and livelihoods, as well as encouraged to advocate for conditions and technologies that will support their well-being. Green social work upholds social and environmental justice (Dominelli, 2012) and can assist the profession’s continuing work towards the equal and ethical treatment of all people (Muldoon, 2006).

Conclusion

At a time of concern about global warming and climate changes and their impact upon humans and the natural environment, GSW has emerged as an approach that provides a holistic perspective for social work intervention (Dominelli, 2012). To understand more about the impact of climate change and disasters upon individuals and communities and the natural environment, research must be conducted on the coping strategies and experiences of persons affected by disasters such as Erika and most recently hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria which also severely affected the Caribbean. This should include research on the survival of vulnerable groups affected by disasters. Within the Caribbean, all departments of social work within the University of the West Indies should pool resources and collaborate with the UWI Centre for Resource Management and Environmental Studies (CERMES) and the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA). This will foster interdisciplinary and inter-organisational links for research on the weather, climate change, sustainable development and various environmental concerns in a region that is prone to disasters. Findings can inform interventions to mitigate future calamities (Dominelli, 2012).

Interventions using a GSW approach can be used effectively for working with clients before and after disasters such as Erika. Interventions must encompass knowledge, techniques and skills
that social workers can use in their efforts not only to enhance the quality of living for clients but also to promote a ‘fit’ between clients and the natural world in which they live.

References


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Part III

Green agricultural practices