Making connections with survivors of a catastrophic flood in West Virginia

A green social work approach to climate change adaptation

Willette F. Stinson and Larry D. Williams

Introduction

A catastrophic flood in West Virginia was an extreme weather event that presented an unprecedented advocacy opportunity for social workers who saved many lives that were endangered by this event. Thus, this chapter provides social workers with a good example of what persons are going to do when responding actively to an environmental crisis. The main argument is that green social work is progressive, has a moral compass pointing towards justice (Dominelli, 2016), and holds potential to do a lot more. This chapter intends to help persons define and redefine their current and future roles in preventing environmental injustice(s). This catastrophic flood is viewed as a time for community involvement and support in which social workers were able to participate. As authors, our aim in this chapter is to broaden and deepen understanding of the climate change adaptation process, and support the development of better disaster preparedness planning and response measures to improve livelihoods, human health and well-being (Howard, 2012). We advocate incorporating storytelling into crisis intervention to facilitate social welfare and social justice in green social work practice and thereby contribute to the intellectual and political substance of the green social work model.

Description of the phenomenon of a particular disaster or environmental crisis

Historically, the cornerstone of social work practice is the person in the environment (PIE) or the ecological perspective (Wieck, 1981). However, recent trends in global warming, the effects of greenhouse gasses, extreme changes in weather patterns, massive earthquakes, tsunamis, urban unrest, and hurricanes (Collins, 2015) have resulted in environmental disasters that have displaced thousands, if not millions of people globally. This has led to what Cohn (2011) termed environmental refugees. Those considered environmental refugees tend to be from developing
countries, racial and ethnic minorities, and those most vulnerable to social injustices (Cohn, 2011; Malonenbeach and Zuo, 2013). Crumbling infrastructures and egregious neglect by policymakers are very likely to increase their risk of exposure to contaminated air, water and food supplies (Vardoulakis, Dear and Williamson, 2016; Dwyer, 2009) during man-made and environmental disasters.

The state of West Virginia in the US found itself on the national media stage. From 23 to 24 June 2016, there was extreme precipitation and flooding that forced West Virginians into the role of storyteller, and they showed the world the Mountaineer spirit, namely the philosophy of getting knocked down and getting back up on your feet. The Salvation Army and the American Red Cross arrived with volunteers in response to the call for help from all over the country. The American Red Cross, in partnership with the Southern Baptist Convention and AmeriCorps, helped plan and manage the multitude of resources needed to support a natural disaster of this large scope and scale. Between 23 June 2016 and 18 July 2016, the American Red Cross of West Virginia responded to people in homes hit by the devastating and historic West Virginia flooding. Their endeavours resulted in 13 shelters being opened, over 2,300 overnight stays, over 198,300 meals and snacks served, nearly 133,000 relief items distributed and more than 8,500 mental health contacts made. Also, over 1,700 cases were opened to help individuals and families in need; this process engendered a systems-wide response.

On social media Duracell Batteries posted, ‘West Virginia, we’re on the way’. Also, famous West Virginians such as Brad Paisley, Jennifer Garner, Coach Jimbo Fisher, Coach Rick Trickett, and Coach Nick Saban came together to support schools affected by the devastating flood waters. For persons who wanted to contribute to ongoing flood relief efforts, the websites, www.volunteerwv.com and www.wvflood.com were established. Also, Jim Justice, CEO of the Greenbrier Resort, created ‘The Greenbrier’s Neighbors; Loving Neighbors’ campaign to collect food and money for flood victims. More information about the campaign and how to make donations can be found on the Resort’s website.

The Greenbrier Resort, which has 710 rooms and employs about 1,800 people, was set to host the PGA (Professional Golfers Association) tour in July, but cancelled it due to the flooding. Ensuing fires engulfed homes, and for some there was very little to return to. As roads were cleared, many residents, in parts of the state, cautiously returned to their homes to salvage whatever belongings they could find. In the heat and mud, the media set out to document this historic disaster through interviews, photographs and videos. Newspapers reported that more than 10 inches of rain – one-quarter of West Virginia’s yearly rainfall, had fallen in a single day. It was evident that the nation was observing West Virginians battling high waters.

As the waters receded, people made sacrifices for people they had not known before. And, stories of rescue and clean-up arose, as did stories of loss of homes, vehicles, businesses, schools and, most tragically, lives. The flooding was especially deadly due to a phenomenon that the meteorologist called ‘training’, which means repeated rain, associated with thunderstorms, line up over the same location like the cars of a freight train. Torrential rain inundated parts of southern and central West Virginia. This was an exceptional meteorological incident that had damaging results. Part of the worst flooding occurred in Greenbrier County, and the National Weather Service described rainfall there as ‘historic’ and ‘an extremely rare’ occurrence. According to Jason Samenow of The Washington Post, the flood was a once-in-a-1000-year-event. The National Weather Service concurred, saying: ‘Return period data suggest this would be nearly a one in a thousand year event’. The torrential rain and high water destroyed more than 100 homes, washed out scores of bridges and roads and knocked out power to 66,000 properties and trapped 500 people in a shopping centre when a bridge was washed out. Also, it forced the shutdown of gas in the town of White Sulphur Springs, according to Governor Ray Earl Tomblin. This
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Historic disaster was called, ‘the worst in a century in some parts of the state’. Governor Tomblin declared a state of emergency in 44 of West Virginia’s 55 counties on Friday, 24 June 2016. He deployed 150 members of the National Guard to help emergency responders. President Obama declared the flooding a ‘major disaster’, making funding obtainable for residents of Greenbrier, Kanawha, and Nicholas counties, all profoundly affected by the flooding. Specifically in the hardest-hit county, Greenbrier, in excess of 10 inches fell and as much as seven inches fell in three hours. While this event is one of the worst in some parts of the state, it is the third deadliest flood on record in state history. Also, the death toll is recorded as the highest from flash floods in the United States (US) since May 2010, when CNN reported the death of 27 people in flooding in Kentucky, Mississippi and Tennessee.

The socio-economic, political and cultural contexts

Dominelli (2013) reported that the context for social work guidance that can help legitimise the rationale for the social work profession to address environmental issues is social justice. This lies at the heart of green social work and includes disaster mitigation, preparedness and prevention as well as socio-economic issues, alongside geological and meteorological aspects. For instance, the rebuilding of the new Herbert Hoover High School and the Clendenin Elementary schools is projected to cost US$68 million. According to Ryan Quinn of the Charleston Gazette-Mail newspaper (16 September 2016), Charlie Wilson, Kanawha County Schools’ executive director of facilities planning, gave the US$68 million figure on 15 September 2016, saying ‘the Federal Emergency Management Agency is expected to fund at least 75 per cent of that cost, if not 90 per cent, and the public school system plans to ask the SBA for the remaining 25 per cent or 10 per cent this year’. Also, in the same newspaper publication, Laura Haight wrote that nearly four months after the 23 June 2016 floods, the Crossing Mall in Elkview remains empty, with no signs of construction to replace the culvert that was swept away by raging flood waters. A hotel, restaurants, gas stations, stores, and other businesses in the shopping centre, including Kmart and Kroger, still are inaccessible, with no connection to Little Sandy Road.

Other problems in these contexts involve such tasks as designing waste collection routes, forecasting the demand for natural energy sources such as coal, deciding whether new schools for displaced students should be portable, rented or purchased, and determining how many of each type of vaccination should be distributed to a given pharmacy. Such problems are addressed in an attempt to increase efficiency in a situation where it is clear what efficiency means (Carlisle and Hanlon, 2014). Green social workers can assist in assessing needs and ensuring that medications reach the people who need them.

Flooding is one of life’s most difficult challenges, even in the most lowly and secluded places. It develops a sense of urgency around the need for water, its access, management and control. The fundamental reason that flooding occurs more or less in some geographic areas has practical, geological and other physical explanations, although some explain it primarily in cultural terms including ‘religion’ and ‘race’. However, another factor is climate change. According to the Francis, Oreskes, Bramhall and Korn (2014) Report, climate change is likely to aggravate pre-existing inequalities by increasing the levels of frequency and severity of floods. Climate is connected to human action and beliefs. People like to attribute troubles precipitated by floods to such things as science or the economy, yet the adverse effects of changing ecology lie within human behaviour. For instance, a goal of climate assessments for the purpose of mitigating a
client’s/service user’s social vulnerability to climate change must include that of helping people adapt to climate change for a sustainable future (Rust, 2004).

Such an environmental crisis is an opportunity for social workers to help others in sustaining their health, safety and well-being. In particular, social work’s role is to counsel individuals, families and groups and enhance their capacity for social functioning and to cope more effectively with the vicissitudes of everyday life. Social work has a compass that points towards justice, and its practitioners strive to help persons of all backgrounds improve their situations holistically (Dominelli, 2016), and feel better as the shadows of despair begin to disappear from their faces.

According to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2006: 141), ‘Social workers have a professional obligation to become knowledgeable and educated about the precarious position of the natural environment, to speak out and take action on behalf of it, and to help their clients act in an environmentally responsible manner’. Even though NASW has precisely worded this environmental policy statement, Shaw (2006) reported that only 10 per cent of Californian social workers who answered his survey were aware that NASW has an environmental policy. Nonetheless, social workers have, at least, a moral responsibility to help clients/service users with climate change adaptation (DiMento and Doughman, 2007) and mitigation (Dominelli, 2012). Consistent with green social work values, the social work profession’s core value of creating a just world and empowering underserved and underrepresented populations can be exemplified in climate change adaptation work and should be achieved within a time frame sufficient to allow societies to sustain themselves while recognising that all nations, especially developing countries, need access to resources for reaching the goal of sustainable social and economic development.

The United Nations (1992), through the Parties (government delegates of UN member states) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) acknowledges that, ‘change in the Earth’s climate and its adverse effects are a common concern of human kind’. Article 1.1 of the UNFCCC asserts that climate change not only affects adversely the natural and supervised ecosystems, but also has ‘significant deleterious effects’ on the ‘operation of socio-economic systems or on human health and welfare’. Therefore, community responders including social workers should not only consider climate change in monetary and environmental terms, but also ‘take climate change into account’ in their relevant ‘social […] policies and actions’ to minimise the ‘adverse effects of mitigation and adaptation projects on societies’ public health and welfare (Article 4.1 (f)). Considering that social workers have this environmental policy for social work intervention, storytelling on social vulnerability to climate change will help to broaden and deepen their understanding of social vulnerabilities and minimise threats to social welfare and environmental justice.

This commentary was written to pay respect and consider the service of social work professionals and lay people who literally went out on the limb despite the risk of compassion fatigue (Adams et al., 2002) that can occur when helping survivors left homeless and traumatized in the aftermath of what was a major disaster for West Virginia. We, as authors, argue strongly for the realisation of social workers’ potential to empower communities in the future, with knowledge of the importance of the role that social work has to play in being an integral part of the team(s) working with survivors of a natural catastrophe such as a flood. This view concurs with Dominelli’s (2011) arguments for green social workers’ involvement in disasters.

What was done in practice interventions, why and how?

A strategy or a planned choice in handling the effects, of this 2016 West Virginia flooding disaster, has been to determine what the residents wanted to do. How to go about it; the issue of
how much money would be allocated to the effort came later. For example, before funds can be appropriately allocated to facilities, decision-makers have to decide what approach to take. But it is difficult to decide what one should attempt without some fairly good idea of feasibility and cost. Public policy analysis or political mapping can make a huge contribution to answering such questions. Our view, however, is that for the analysis of the practice of social work in the middle of public policy decisions, the methods of other disciplines, particularly those of the political and social sciences may have an equally important role to play.

Some crisis intervention methods to help persons affected by flooding, that do not have an economic origin and are at most quasi-quantitative, have come in use in socio-economic, political and cultural contexts. What are those methods for mental and emotional support? And, why and how were they carried out in practice or an intervention? Take notice of disaster services and logistics enabling a community to prepare for, respond to and help people recovering from floods big and small!

In what follows, we as authors conducted a review of the literature to produce outcomes and recommendations for practice in responding to the effects of flooding on mental health (Murray et al., 2012). A crisis intervention approach may constitute a synthesis of two trends in previous work on the general problems for survivors of flooding disasters. One trend may have dealt with the guidance on emergency planning for the impacts of flooding on psychosocial and mental health needs (Crabtree, 2013). The other trend focused on the pre-disaster characteristics of people coping with stress and their length of stay in treatment (Adams et al., 2006) or recovery. The findings of Murray et al. (2012) suggest that a fusion of these two main trends into systematic emphasis upon length-by-outcome groupings is now required. More generally, it is necessary to predict both the amount and rate of coping that constitutes improvement (Benveniste, 2000).

Murray et al.’s (2012) review of the literature published from 2004 to 2010 made a beginning in this direction. However, much more needs to be done when such disasters occur. There is a dearth of literature pertaining to assessments of communities to determine the need for long-range local health service support when disasters take place and the lack of evidence-based support for school guidelines addressing the needs of students for future events. This has led us as authors to recommend that to address the aftermath of disasters, social workers worldwide review community structured crisis interventions, in a consultative manner, with local health services, first responders, school and government officials, church representatives, urban planners and others with experiences in natural disaster emergencies to propose ways forward. This is in keeping with the principles of green social work.

We know a community collectively and individually needs its residents to help one another survive and nurture positive ways of behaving. This chapter aims to acknowledge that they know that, and to ignite passion for more persons entering the field of social work, and to showcase that West Virginians managed to achieve the cooperation and crisis intervention needed after a major natural disaster like that of 2016. Survivor stories can usefully communicate and value each resident’s recovery from their catastrophic loss. Storytelling is an effective procedure to follow in getting impressive results from a community-based responder team (Harrison, 2009).

Social work must go beyond being tangentially involved in green social work practice that involves lack of water and other challenges imposed by climate change or unsustainable urban development, to be intrinsically involved in both in-country and international community-based responder systems to develop a holistic systems-based understanding of urban environments and/or complex environmental health challenges (Vardoulakis et al., 2016), as advised in the green social work model.

This chapter is intended to acquaint professionals in various disciplines with what social workers think, value, and argue about as being critically important in the advent of an environmental
crisis (McKinnon, 2008). Its other aim is to help social workers respect their own traditions and values while they are learning new ones within rapidly changing environmental, societal and institutional contexts.

**Self-evaluation: what lessons can be useful for others?**

This chapter is useful in teaching about the West Virginia Flood of 2016 as a natural disaster to talk about and learn from. Hopefully, readers will rise to the occasion and conduct their own assessments of their usual responses to and feelings after a major natural disaster and juxtapose these with new ideas generated by discourses on crisis interventions and encourage the thought that the social responsibility of unburdening one another after a major natural disaster is a duty that can be accomplished.

Assessments that reflect reality impart tangible evidence of what are the most important lessons that can be useful for others. When catastrophic things beyond one’s control (e.g. floods or earthquakes) happen, people may learn that their usual behaviours or feelings may not be relevant after a major natural disaster.

One lesson to start serving others is by telling an effective story. Throughout this crisis in Charleston, WV, the media reminded people who social work changes lives. This reminder endorses the value of the services provided by social workers. Amazing success stories can explain things in ways that facilitate profound understandings. The big question to answer is what are key messages for green social work? Then, to explore what tips will tell an effective green social work story for social workers who want to engage with sustainability and want to succeed and achieve their goals so that they do not leave anyone behind (or to avoid guess work)?

How do social workers determine their own key messages? News releases, letters-to-the-editor and other skilful communications can create useful perceptions. One goal of such messages could be to spark a feeling (e.g. of compassion, concern, happiness or anger). But, the practitioner should be him/herself and take the time to observe human qualities in communities.

Another goal should be to communicate the difference that a social worker brings. Dreaming of a world where living safely and crisis prevention would have the same meanings for all people, green social workers should continue this work and investigate why the number of people at risk of an environmental disaster has been growing each year, while the majority of people live in areas with high poverty levels that make them more vulnerable to disasters (Landry et al., 2016).

Flooding has distinctly different impacts on the emotional and mental health of individuals. The ensuing lessons are interesting, and are identified in the following list:

1. Telling an effective story that speaks to the adaptive capacity of individuals, families and communities to emerge stronger after a flood disaster is encouraging.
2. For talking points to support key messages, practitioners may need to change their talking points based on the needs and interests of the audience or clients/service users.
3. Feelings motivate people to act.

As authors reflecting on our experiences, we advocate storytelling and recording oral histories about social risks and social vulnerability to climate change (Bowman and Bowman, 2010) through a multidimensional approach that facilitates social welfare and social justice as advocated in green social work practice. Making sense of social work through storytelling is a method for modelling critical reflective practice (Harrison, 2009), and effectively to inform others of what
they should know and how you feel. Another possible benefit of reading this chapter includes feeling empowered to enable environmental refugees to move forward in a sustainable manner.

New questions for research

The primary purpose of this chapter is to provide knowledge of a specific environmental crisis and raise awareness that understanding and direct responses to a disaster survivor’s expectations are fundamental to developing a counselling relationship that may result in the ultimate realisation of the goals of coping with the situation, adjusting to the new reality, and returning to a previous or balanced level of functioning.

Counselling is usefully regarded as a learning phenomenon. In developing an effective counselling relationship, including the personalities of both the client/service user and counsellor forms an important part of the content in the sessions. Counselling satisfaction for survivors of a natural disaster is a variable that is dependent upon many other variables in the overall evaluation of the impact of the counselling process.

Crisis intervention by counsellors should help persons who have developed the symptoms of an Acute Stress Disorder, because they have been exposed to a traumatic situation that overwhelmed their ability to cope with it in a way that they are accustomed to. Furthermore, counsellors and emergency responders generally agree on helping patients/clients/service users to:

- Tell their story.
- Get some detachment from the overwhelming experience to understand what happened.
- Put into words the experience of trauma.
- Return to a previous or balanced level of functioning.

Social workers’ knowledge of others’ values with respect for the integrity of the patient/client/service user, especially those that are incompatible, supports ethical practice. Clinical and practical knowledge can go so far, but social workers have to be qualified in terms of personality, attitude and demeanour. Practices that are in the best interest of the client/service user stem from:

1. The altruism of the professional worker as expressed in community actions in the interest of others, and selfless efforts of courage regardless of maintenance of security and status;
2. Better judgment, due in part at least to experience in crisis intervention;
3. Knowing one’s own values to distinguish those values from that of clients/service users;
4. Skill in expressing ideas clearly and concisely and working effectively with staff and clients/service users; and
5. Knowledge of medical terminology, disease processes, as they relate to clinical interventions and appropriate therapies based on medical or psychological treatment modalities.

Thorough knowledge of social work research, practice, protocols and processes, conversations, interviews with legislators or stakeholders, and public decisions can provide answers to the following questions, so that a main point of green social work can be conveyed to legislators:

- What is the impact of floods on the socio-economic livelihoods of people in your respective community?
- What are the demographics of the most vulnerable groups to floods and what are their coping strategies?
- What are the sustainable policy options for dealing with the problem of floods?
Conclusion

The questions, derived by inductions from the experiences of many, justify the following conclusion. Greater emphasis in training programs on the use of crisis intervention in community-wide disasters could expedite assistance (McKnight and Zack, 2007; Schein, 2016) and provide greater security of public servant administrators and their staff. Regard for the well-being of families and children is relevant to having a service mission that includes protecting public water supplies and fostering stewardship of this natural resource for use by current and future generations of citizens.

This writing will be useful to social workers wanting justification for the significance of answering three questions raised for further exploration. Those questions were: ‘What is the impact of floods on the socio-economic livelihoods of people in your respective community’? ‘What are the demographics of the most vulnerable groups to floods and what are their coping strategies’? ‘What are sustainable policy options for dealing with the problem of floods’? Those three questions, formulated on the basis of work currently being done in the field of green social work, pose questions for future research.

Also, this work can help enlarge social workers’ philosophies and their pedagogies (Dominelli, 2006; Dominelli and Ioakimidis, 2015). Moreover, a targeted use of optimism may be more effective than simply reaching safety or shelter for survivors of the West Virginia flooding of 2016. This was a major natural catastrophe in which social work proved its societal and institutional value and that augmented lay people’s knowledge of crisis interventions afterward. Through reporting such events, the authors offer support for the social worker(s) striving to achieve the cooperation needed to form a more disciplined, non-threatening atmosphere and maximise each individual’s productivity.

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