Solidarity in times of disaster

Rosemary A. Barbera

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Introduction

When disaster strikes, people become off-balance, confused, dazed, overwhelmed and shocked. During times of great stress such as disasters, people may be supported by their community and engage in profound acts of solidarity. Thus, the experience of disaster is one of incredible stress, but it is also one of deep community, solidarity, support and courage, especially in the Global South. Here, community ties and collective well-being are often more important than individual success or status.

Chile is a country known for its seismic activity. Some of the world’s strongest earthquakes have occurred there. In February 2010, Chile experienced an earthquake that measured 8.8 on the Richter Scale. The earthquake was so strong that it changed the world’s rotation slightly. In the following weeks, the press showed numerous photos of intense destruction caused by the earthquake and the so-called post-earthquake looting. While some people do take advantage of the chaotic aftermath of a disaster, this is often an outcome of inequality. In societies that are unequal, violence is more pervasive (Houle, 2016) than in poor societies. Certain things may be expected to happen. Often the media show us pictures and relate stories that confirm that perception. But that is not the whole story (Tierney, 2003).

The press was covered with images of people who were bereft, needy, powerless and alone. However, many people react altruistically (Solnit, 2009) in communities during and after disasters due to their existing social ties and commitment to others. The press did not report the incredible acts of solidarity that were evident throughout Chile. After the Chilean disaster of the military coup on Tuesday, 11 September 1973, similar acts of solidarity and resiliency were demonstrated throughout Chile. These responses are not atypical and are often overshadowed by the responses of large international NGOs that rob common people of their agency and take over as elite panic sets in.

This chapter examines community responses to disaster, both human-made and natural, from a perspective of solidarity and resiliency. It shares the responses of some of the most affected Chileans during the disaster and tells their stories of survival and community and contextualises these within the long tradition of brave acts of solidarity of ordinary Chileans. The chapter builds on 29 years of work and study in Chile examining the immense solidarity of ordinary
people in the face of death and destruction, whether a dictatorship or a natural disaster. The examples of ordinary Chileans can teach social workers a good deal about resiliency, solidarity, community building, and relationships of partnership and mutuality.

This chapter does not claim that disasters do not produce suffering. They do. And, they exacerbate already tenuous living situations for so many in the world. At the same time, disaster ‘relief’ often ignores the community and does not build on already-existing community resources.

**Background**

On 18 September 1810, Chile began a 10-year war that resulted in independence from Spain. However, its relationship with Spain and the influence of Spanish culture and society did not end there. The new country of Chile was heavily influenced by Spanish custom, culture, religion and government. The Spanish colonisers based the state on their view of Catholicism as hierarchical and a strong oligarchy (Salazar and Pinto, 1999). This tradition of oligarchical power in the hands of an elite group persisted throughout the 19th and 20th centuries (Vitale, 1992). And, it compelled 19th-century miners of the nitrate mines in northern Chile to forge an alliance and seek better working conditions. This was the first of many examples of the working class standing up for themselves and organising to improve the quality of their work and lives. This led to the formation of the first unions in Chile and the start of a ‘long march’ (Winn, 1986) that 140 years later would culminate with the 1970 election of Salvador Allende Gossens, a socialist, as president of the Republic.

Allende ran for president at the head of a coalition of political parties known as the **Unidad Popular** (Popular Unity – UP), promising to redistribute the wealth of Chile – the largest exporter of copper in the world – to improve the quality of life of all. Allende was supported by the working-class and poor people of Chile, but he faced significant opposition from within the country, and from Washington, D.C. (Petras and Morley, 1975; Verdugo, 2004). The Cuban Revolution was only 11 years old and the Nixon Administration feared that if Chile ‘fell to communism’ there would be radical changes throughout the Americas (Kornbluh, 1998; National Security Archive, n.d.; Uribe and Opaso, 2001). Nixon and Kissinger developed a plan to ‘make the Chilean economy scream’ and defeat Allende (Kornbluh, 2003). The United States (US) intervened economically and militarily to destabilise the country. On Tuesday, 11 September 1973, the Chilean military, headed by Augusto Pinochet Ugarte, staged a military coup, supported by the Chilean elites, and ushered in over 17 years of state terrorism.

During the first years of the dictatorship, the principal aim was to ‘cure Chile of its communist cancer’ (quote attributed to General Pinochet). The military regime focused on eliminating leaders in the *poblaciones* (shantytowns), factories and political parties associated with the UP. The military claimed that they were waging an internal war against the threat of godless communism, and they established massive concentration camps in soccer stadiums in Santiago, on remote islands in the South and old mining towns in the North. In these concentration camps, they brutally tortured and killed prisoners. From these camps, thousands of persons disappeared; the majority of their remains are still missing. Some of the bodies of the disappeared were thrown into the sea; others were buried in clandestine graves. According to the Truth Commission Report, ‘the system of disappearances was systematically applied during the first four years of military rule. Detention of the victims was not acknowledged’ (Comisión Nacional, 1991: xxv).

During this time, all organisations and meetings, including church meetings, were outlawed by the military junta, especially in poor areas. Political meetings were banned, as was all neighbourhood organising. Anyone found organising or engaging in communal activities was subject
to arrest, torture and worse. The military police and armed forces patrolled the country and decreed a state of siege so that people could not be on the streets after dusk. Despite these consequences, resilient *pobladores* (people living in shantytowns) throughout Chile continued to organise. They organised in different ways, and under different auspices, but, ‘the citizens had learned to participate and wanted to participate, and they did not accept, at this point in their own development, to be excluded’ (Salazar and Pinto, 1999: 49). The numbers of persons participating dramatically decreased, but there was still activity throughout the country.

The resilience that ordinary Chileans demonstrated immediately after the coup and for over 17 years of military dictatorship is a strong indicator of the resilience of Chileans, and solidarity as a societal value. This ensured everyone had access to food, especially if family members were being pursued by the military. Acts of solidarity became less numerous as the regime dragged on and people became fearful for themselves. These are the same characteristics that led so many Chileans to assist their neighbours after the earthquake in 2010.

**Earthquakes and reactions to disaster**

Seismic activity has led to many disasters around the world. In places where there is little infrastructure and high levels of poverty, the devastation can be massive and lead to already-precarious living conditions becoming threatening.

Earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, and other natural disasters shed light on social cracks and fissures invisible in everyday life. These disasters provoke social crises that states tend to resolve with militarization, which in turn shows the profound crises that our societies have been undergoing.

> (Zibechi, 2010: 1)

The fissures in the Earth seem to mirror the fissures in society, or vice versa. This does not mean that the people most affected are unable to respond and are reduced to rubble like the buildings around them. Examples from around the world – San Francisco, CA in 1906, and Mexico City in 1985 (Solnit, 2009) – demonstrate the resilience of people who in the midst of disaster save the lives of others. ‘[T]he prevalent human nature in disaster is resilient, resourceful, generous, empathic, and brave’ (Solnit, 2009: 8), reaching out to neighbours, known and unknown, to offer assistance and work together to survive. This is particularly true in more collectivist societies or among immigrant populations from collectivist societies. ‘What you believe shapes how you act. How you act results in life or death, for yourself or others’ (Solnit, 2009: 2). So, if one believes in the goodness of humanity and if they see their well-being tied to the well-being of others, they respond accordingly.

**Elite panic**

While those most affected are responding to disaster, government organisms and non-governmental organisations are also mobilising. While they often lend needed assistance and have the ability to provide tangible goods such as food and temporary housing, they often impose their assistance on those affected without incorporating people who have already been mobilised. In many instances, governmental and non-governmental organisations dismantle the organic forms of organising and assistance that emerge during disasters. Their articulated concern is the wish to deal with panic and chaos in the community, but research reveals that panic is relatively rare and is more pervasive in situations where social bonds do not exist. However, panic exists in
the plans of those who prepare the responses to disaster (Clarke and Chase, 2008). To a certain measure, perpetuating the myth of panic also serves the interests of the elites in that they can impose their model of relief and maintain their importance in the hierarchy (Tierney, 2003). This is often discussed in the literature as ‘elite panic’.

Elite panic underestimates the ability of people to organise and provide assistance and safety for themselves and their community. Elite panic emerges from the belief that the organising that occurs after disaster will usurp the role of the state and of powerful NGOs. ‘Planners and policy makers sometimes act as if the human response to threatening conditions is more dangerous than the threatening conditions themselves’ (Clarke and Chase, 2008: 994). So, they quickly move in to squash work that has sprung up organically and do not recognise that ‘in the wake of an earthquake, a bombing, or a major storm, most people are altruistic, urgently engaged in caring for themselves and those around them, strangers and neighbours as well as friends and loved ones’ (Solnit, 2009: 2). These planners doubt the good intentions of those who have mobilised and see themselves as the rightful ‘saviours’.

Research has demonstrated that this image of people in a chaotic panic is not accurate (see Clarke and Chase, 2008; and Solnit, 2009).

Decades of meticulous sociological research on behaviour in disasters, from the bombings of World War II to floods, tornadoes, earthquakes, and storms across the continent and around the world, have demonstrated this, but belief lags behind, and often the worst behaviour in the wake of a calamity is on the part of those who believe that others will behave savagely and that they themselves are taking defensive measures against barbarism. (Solnit, 2009: 2)

Elite panic is based on a fallacy that is perpetuated by those who have built a reputation for action after disasters and who can disseminate their message quickly through press and state channels. But, like the Chileans that continued to organise under threat during the military regime, in the aftermath of disasters many people continue to organise and engage in profound solidarity work. The next section will discuss this.

**Protagonists and protagonism**

The epicentre of the 2010 earthquake was in the final weekend of summer in the south of Chile, close to the coast. Many people were at the coast. Residents, accustomed to earthquakes and increased sea levels, were able to escape. Tourists, however, were not as lucky because they did not know to flee to higher ground. The tsunami left boats more than a kilometre inland after the sea receded. The earthquake toppled historic buildings and new constructions. It did not affect constructions from the Allende years, however, since they were built to withstand earthquakes, a policy that the Pinochet regime repealed.

Amidst all that destruction were courageous acts of solidarity among people who knew each other and people who did not. Disaster requires that:

> we act, and act altruistically, bravely, and with initiative in order to survive or save the neighbors, no matter how we vote or what we do for a living. The positive emotions that arise in those unpromising circumstances demonstrate that social ties and meaningful work are deeply desired, readily improvised, and intensely rewarding.

(Solnit, 2009: 7)
In Chile the history of people acting bravely in the face of disaster and political violence surfaced after the earthquake to show that ‘the prevalent human nature in disaster is resilient, resourceful, generous, empathic, and brave’ (Solnit, 2009: 9).

A defining characteristic of outside groups responding to disasters is a focus on work with individuals to help them deal with trauma. While these events are indeed traumatic, in collective cultures, the individual approach is not helpful. Survivors of torture and disaster, for example, talk about their need to be connected to others in order to heal. The assistance they need is in rebuilding what was damaged so that they can return to some semblance of normality. When survivors of torture return to their communities, they are able to reintegrate well when they have a community group, political party or religious organisation that welcomes them back. It is only when their ties to the community have been broken – because community members are scared to associate with them, for instance, that they fare poorly and need therapeutic assistance. They need to be reconnected to community for the ‘language of therapy speaks almost exclusively of the consequence of disaster as trauma, suggesting a humanity that is unbearably fragile, a self that does not act but is acted upon, the most basic recipe of the victim’ (Solnit, 2009: 9). The following examples demonstrate the resilience and power that many survivors embody.

La Pincoya

The población La Pincoya emerges within the context of land taken by poor people without a home of their own, taking over unused land and establishing squatters’ settlements. These land takeovers were well-organised by community groups actively working to find a solution to a lack of adequate housing in poor areas (Lagos, et al., 2002). La Pincoya was formed through a series of tomas (land takeovers) in the late 1960s. Neighbours had been meeting and saving money to work with the government to find housing.

When the government became unresponsive, they searched for suitable spaces themselves. They found these and talked with the owners who agreed to sell the land to the government to build low-income housing. Government disinterest led people to engage in a series of land takeovers, with the permission of the owners of the land to call attention to their situation and force the government to work with them. When Allende was campaigning for president he visited these tomas and promised that if he were elected, he would work with them to construct their new houses. Shortly after his election Allende returned to La Pincoya and fulfilled his promise. He and his administration worked closely with the residents to plan and build their neighbourhood. The people themselves worked closely with the architects to design the size and layout of their homes, including what kind of materials would be used in their construction.

Starting a new neighbourhood with more than 500 families was an awesome task that required high levels of organisation. The leaders of La Pincoya were up to the challenge and mobilised the residents to work in committees to establish schools, public transport and healthcare, as well as bringing plumbing and electricity to the neighbourhood. They continued to organise to build homes, schools and health centres. On the morning on 11 September 1973, residents awoke to helicopters circling overhead and tanks in their streets. Because this area was known to be one of significant organisation, it was one of the first areas to suffer the repression of the military regime. On that day, and in the weeks to follow, men and boys were rounded up and taken to a nearby soccer field where they stood for hours on end in the rain, without food or water. While they remained in the field, houses were searched. This happened not once, but repeatedly in the first year of the dictatorship. Neighbourhood leaders were also rounded up and taken to military barracks.
Luzmenia Toro remembers being taken and held *incomunicada* for days, away from her three young children and husband. She was released, only to be rearrested a number of times. Hers is not the only case. The residents’ work of building their lives and their homes stopped dead in its tracks since any collective work was now considered subversive or terrorist activity. According to Luzmenia:

> We had continued to battle for our houses. We were lucky because our homes, in this sector (of La Pincoya) were completed before the military coup – other sectors were not so lucky. Our houses were stable, built of brick and designed by us. They may have been small, but they met our needs. Neighbours from other *tomas* saw how we had designed our homes and decided they wanted the same. However, after the coup, all advancement in building the houses ceased, and our neighbours were left living in shacks. You can still see the difference today, nearly 40 years later.

*(Personal communication, June, 2010)*

The military coup interrupted the social processes and collective life of La Pincoya. While much had been accomplished through ongoing collective struggle and sacrifice, much remained to be done. The collective life of this *población*, and so many others, was brutally curtailed by outside forces that used military might to control them. Residents were left terrorised and scared; their leaders were jailed, and tortured. Some leaders were assassinated; others disappeared; and still others fled for their lives. According to one leader, ‘The social leaders were persecuted by the government of Pinochet; many were disappeared, others killed’ (Personal communication, June, 2010), but they did not stop their work. This is the miracle of La Pincoya.

Participation in popular organisations dropped after the coup. Despite the devastating terror that was overwhelming the country, some leaders in La Pincoya continued to meet and organise clandestinely. The leaders of the *población* began *comedores infantiles* to distribute food to children in the *población*. After the coup, unemployment levels were high because factories were closed and people who had any relationship to the UP or unions were repressed. Since La Pincoya had a high concentration of residents who supported the UP, this *población* was hit especially hard by the military. These *comedores* first focused on the children of people who were detained or had to flee the country, and then on other children. Eventually they became *comedores populares*, providing food to children and adults, without distinction.

Aside from the *comedores*, residents organised *bolsas de cesantes* (groups of unemployed workers) and workshops to train people in labour-oriented skills such as sewing. They worked closely with the pastor of the local Catholic Church, and formed women’s groups, health committees and youth groups. In the wake of the dictatorship disaster, these neighbours demonstrated incredible resilience and protagonism.

When the earthquake of 2010 occurred, residents of La Pincoya once again mobilised. Although the epicentre was far to the south of La Pincoya, the earthquake and tsunami affected the electrical grid of most of Chile. Consequently, people were left without electricity and unable to get water since the pumps were not functioning. Leaders worked with youth leaders to organise brigades to walk the two kilometres to get water and walk back uphill to distribute it. They also took cell phones to be charged at the police barracks over one kilometre away. Likewise, they distributed food to people since many stores were not functioning and people without work could not afford to purchase food. Finally, the health committees that saved lives during the military regime and continued to work to put pressure on the government to fulfil the human right to health offered healthcare to neighbours since health clinics were barely
functioning. Once again, Pincoyanos were the protagonists of their own lives. As neighbourhood leader Luzmenia Toro explained, ‘La Pincoya is a testament to the pursuit of human rights. Its creation is due to the resiliency of the people and the effects that people can have when they unite and work together for a common goal’ (Personal communication, June, 2010).

Agüita de la Perdiz

In the South of Chile, in the city of Concepción, close to the epicentre of the earthquake, the damage and devastation from the powerful quake was very severe. Tall buildings were reduced to rubble and entire neighbourhoods swallowed by the sea. Water and electricity were cut off everywhere and many streets were impassable because they had buckled or were filled with debris. In this context, neighbours of población Agüita de la Perdiz organised to take care of one another.

Like La Pincoya, Agüita de la Perdiz is an emblematic población whose roots are tied to a land takeover and whose residents actively opposed the military regime. Precariously situated on the side of hill, houses seem placed in a haphazard way, looking like they might tumble down the hill at any moment. Most residents are working class and have seen their ability to earn a liveable wage deteriorate over more than 30 years with the imposition of a savage form of neoliberalism in Chile.

The first priority of leaders of Agüita de la Perdiz was to care for survivors and search for those missing. After the initial search, some leaders began to organise getting food to residents and finding clean water. At this point, the story of Agüita de la Perdiz becomes more interesting. The press in Chile and beyond was focusing on the immense damage caused by the earthquake and tsunami. Pictures of destruction abounded in news reports; the images were not pleasant. In the midst of these images of destruction, the press began to show images of a couple of stores being looted by people in Concepción. The same images were shown over and over, as if to argue that large-scale looting was occurring. The stories focused on one man who stole a television set and others who ransacked the local supermarket. What the media stories did not show was that the leaders of Agüita de la Perdiz used that food and water to feed the people of the community.

Moreover, not only did the leaders from Agüita de la Perdiz reach out to others in Concepción from middle- and upper-class neighbourhoods, but also asked them if they needed supplies. As one woman, a university professor at nearby Universidad de Concepción, stated:

I live close to a shantytown (Agüita de la Perdiz). I saw with my own eyes what happened to the supposedly looted boxes – they were immediately distributed outside of the local school, and packages were made for those who were hardest hit. In fact, days after the hurricane, when the government had not yet responded and there was nothing else around, the people of the shantytown came to us to see if we were OK and to offer us, the middle-class, help. They were not trying to sell us anything, they offered help for free and they left a package for me with candles and batteries.

(Personal communication, June, 2010)

Once again, people in dire circumstances demonstrated their resilience and reached out to others to share what they had available. This provides a lesson for social workers who are concerned with ensuring that all persons can live a life of dignity.
Application to social work

Stories like those from *La Pincoya* and *Agüita de la Perdiz* appear regularly throughout the world. People share what little they have with people who have even less. The lesson is not that we need little to survive, as some would have us believe. The real lesson is that through solidarity we improve our lives and the lives of those around us. This lesson is an important one. Green social workers can take away significant lessons from these stories and apply these to work with vulnerable populations. They can learn to: see beyond mainstream accounts of what is happening; question theories including those of elite panic; and accept people as protagonists who take charge of their own lives when appropriate conditions exist. They can pursue justice, not charity, and integrate vicarious resilience into their practice.

Believe in the power of the people, not those in power

One of the central lessons exemplified by *La Pincoya* and *Agüita de la Perdiz* is that real change can come from below. Paraphrasing Margaret Mead, change can only happen when people themselves organise to make it happen. While affecting policy is an important commitment of social work, it is woefully insufficient. Even the most honest of politicians must be backed by the people to propose legislation that can make significant change. Opposition to them has vast reserves of money. Those struggling for social and economic justice do not have those resources so they have to be loud and persistent, as well as allow those most affected by injustice to lead. This means giving up the tired slogan of ‘being a voice for the voiceless’. That statement robs people of their agency. Vulnerable and oppressed groups are not voiceless; their voices are just not listened to. Social workers have to use the power and privilege afforded by their education and professional status in society, not to be ventriloquists, but to make sure those voices are heard. Rather, we can help open doors of power and then step aside to let the people enter first.

Given the fear that the elite have, making sure people’s voices are heard is not insignificant. As seen in disasters, those in power fear the potential power of their constituents (Solnit, 2009). People’s responses of generosity and solidarity to political violence and natural disasters, demonstrate that even in the face of great danger, significant social change can be achieved if these were permitted to continue. Fearful elites truncate those processes. One factor is that:

Elites fear disruption of the social order, challenges to their legitimacy... Fear of social disorder; fear of poor [people], minorities and immigrants; obsession with looting and property crime; willingness to resort to deadly force; and actions taken on the basis of rumor. (Tierney, 2003: 34)

This fear is about losing control, stature and power in society. Thus, control and order are imposed from above. The people themselves have many of the answers to social problems and with further resources, could be the engines of social change. Movements for social change begin by building community and green social workers can play a role in making that happen. ‘People at that moment [of disaster] felt a solidarity and an empathy for each other that they did not feel at other times’ (Solnit, 2009: 28) since they were facing a crisis together. Green social workers can help that cooperation and community continue and grow.

Believe in people – vicarious resilience

Another powerful lesson from people who organise to meet their needs in times of crisis, disaster and danger refers to the power of vicarious resilience. Social workers often experience vicarious
trauma because they work with people who have suffered greatly. This vicarious trauma is real since the stories many social workers hear and witness can be profoundly harmful. However, by only focusing on trauma, social workers ignore one of the profession’s tenets – to believe in the innate strength and resilience of human beings rather than its pathologies and weaknesses. Many people with whom practitioners work have suffered greatly, but they have survived despite those circumstances. The trauma can be both acknowledged and work with to overcome it, while simultaneously celebrating their resilience and integrating that resilience into social workers’ own lives (Enstrom, Hernandez, and Gangsei, 2008).

Likewise, the Northern World’s interpretations of what is needed must be left behind because those interpretations can strip communities of their resiliency and solidarity and cause long-term damage rather than healing. After the massive tsunami that hit Asia in 2004, people from helping professions from the Northern World arrived en masse to places like Sri Lanka to offer psychological support. They never asked whether a network of professionals already engaged in this work existed in Sri Lanka because the country was in the midst of a long-standing civil war. Nor did they know the local languages or cultures. They just assumed that their model of healing after disaster would be useful. It was not, and the Psychosocial Working Group of Sri Lanka published a brochure kindly asking the foreigners to leave as they were doing more harm than good (Araceli Garcia del Soto, Personal communication, May, 2005), a concern echoed by green social workers (Dominelli, 2012).

Social workers can also learn from those who worked with people affected by significant political violence, including torture, assassination and disappearance. They have noted how inspired they were by the people with whom they worked. The way people ‘overcame adversity affected or changed the therapist’s own attitude and emotions’ (Hernández, Gangsei, and Engstrom, 2007: 234). The therapists’ vicarious learning was positive – they were able to integrate the resilience of the people and not be held down by traumatic experiences. In at least one case, the therapist was affected to the extent that she was able to regain hope for the future (Hernández, Gangsei and Engstrom, 2007).

Pursue justice and liberation, not charity

Another powerful lesson for practitioners to learn from these examples of solidarity and mutual aid is that what is being done is not charity, which perpetuates the status quo and unjust social structures. Rather, these call upon the profession to ensure that practice advances social and economic justice and leads to liberation. Charity is short term and does not ask the hard questions that go to the root of the problem. Thus, charity is often welcome in the face of disaster because it does not upset the structures already in place. Justice, as green social workers argue, makes us question those structures, recognise that they are inherently unjust and have been put in place to benefit a few.

Charity can also be humiliating. In the south of Chile, for example, government shacks began to arrive to house those most affected by the earthquake and tsunami months later. Winter was coming and the crisis was worsening because the Chilean winter in the South is harsh. The housing that the government sent had gaping holes in the sides of the structures. The wind close to the coast can be fierce in winter and the cold whipped through these shacks. The wood used to construct the homes was nothing more than particleboard which had already begun to swell and develop mould with the winter rains. The people clearly understood that they were not a priority. They were living in shacks that were so poorly constructed they would not last through the month. However, these same shacks came with electric metres already installed so that they could be charged for using electricity right away. People who I spoke with (May, 2010) were
humiliated and indignant. Some even decided to burn the shacks, preferring to build their own structures with their neighbours in order to survive the winter. ‘The difference between citizens feeding themselves and each other and being given food according to a system involving tickets and outside administrators is the difference between independence and dependence, between mutual aid and charity’ (Solnit, 2009: 47). Solidarity, or mutual aid, should be the priority of social workers committed to social transformation and individual and community empowerment according to green social work principles (Dominelli, 2012).

Conclusion

Responses to natural and political disasters, including the earthquake/tsunami and military coup/dictatorship in Chile, offer examples of how best to support the organic work that communities of vulnerable populations have always performed for their survival. Because that work is ongoing, these communities are well prepared to respond to disasters by continuing with their assistance and support of each other. These moments give a glimpse into how society might be better organised. ‘It is present immediately, instantly, when people demonstrate resourcefulness, altruism, improvisational ability and kindness. A disaster produces chaos immediately, but the people hit by that chaos usually improvise’ (Solnit, 2009: 95) to respond in solidarity with one another and provide for and with one another.

The kinds of responses of ordinary people are those of people who care about others and are concerned for their collective future. These are people who, in the moments after disaster, embody what it means to be civically active for the betterment of society. Rather than expending so much energy trying to control them, social workers should be asking how to cooperate to strengthen and recreate this type of civic action all the time. This action is democracy in action: ‘Here the people govern and the government obeys’ (Los Zapatistas, as cited by Solnit, 2009: 180). Luzmenia Toro, who at 18 was one of the principal organisers of the toma that became La Pincoya sums it up well: ‘Resistimos, y seguiremos resistiendo, porque la historia nuestra es una de protagonismo’. ‘We have resisted, and will continue resisting because our history is a history of protagonism’ (Personal communication, July, 2010, author’s translation). Social workers are faced with the challenge: Do they obstruct such protagonism and become agents of social control, or do they follow the lead of the people to become true agents of change as advocated by green social workers?

References

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