

D. Before Disaster strikes

Social work has a key role to play in the preparation and mitigation of disaster, according to Professor David Gillespie.

MANY HAVE CALLED 2005 “THE YEAR OF DISASTERS.” David Gillespie, professor of social work, has been studying the subject throughout his career. He is nationally recognized as one of the most prominent professionals calling for a new approach to dealing with disaster.

DAVID LINZEE: What’s the American attitude to disaster and how does this differ from attitudes in other parts of the world?

DAVID GILLESPIE: Traditionally, our attitude was fatalistic. We saw disasters as unavoidable and beyond human control. They were called “acts of God.” And there was little, if any, preparation, only a reaction when disaster events happened. As science evolved, our attitude shifted toward trying to anticipate disasters and plan how we might respond. More recently, over the past 15 to 20 years, disasters are becoming recognized as symptoms of broader, more basic problems. This emerging attitude

By David Linzee | Photo by Geoff Story



holds that disasters result because of the decisions we make about where and how to live. For example, we choose to concentrate on the coasts because they offer some of the most beautiful places to live. The emphasis is shifting from just preparing to respond to preparing and mitigating or reducing the risk of negative consequences stemming from disasters. This means more attention to building codes, land use, insurance, and warning systems.

Around the world, attitudes toward disaster vary depending on the history of disaster and level of development. In poor underdeveloped countries, the attitude often remains fatalistic. In underdeveloped countries where science is gaining a foothold and disasters are understood as acts of nature, there is still the problem of inadequate resources to promote preparedness. Many people in underdeveloped countries consider the ideas of disaster preparedness and mitigation to be Western ideas and not necessarily appropriate for them. Countries just beginning to industrialize are relatively indifferent to agricultural damage because they usually have financial reserves to purchase food on global markets. But these economies are vulnerable to infrastructure damage such as transportation, communication, and public utilities. Rural-agricultural economies are relatively immune to disasters of short and sudden impact, but they are susceptible to disasters of long duration such as droughts, pest damage, and civil conflict. Disasters and development are closely linked in that disasters can both destroy development projects and create development opportunities.

DL: What typically happens in the aftermath of a disaster?

DG: There is an outpouring of sympathy and concern and money. People give readily, as we saw with hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Then interest declines rapidly. About a year ago, a tsunami killed 250,000 people — a tragedy that dwarfs Katrina. If I pick up a paper today, I find no mention of it.

DL: How does our forgetfulness affect our preparedness for the next disaster?

DG: Forgetfulness undermines motivation to prepare or mitigate hazards. This happens because of a tendency to focus on each disaster as a unique and rare event instead of seeing each disaster as part of a series of recurring events around the world or as a symptom stemming from the way we structure our societies.

DL: How does our thinking about disaster have to change?

DG: Instead of seeing disaster as simply a product of nature, we need to take into account the interactions among the natural environment, the built environment, and the dimensions of society — attitudes and beliefs, behavior patterns, political structures, and economies. Take the New Madrid earthquakes of 1811–1812, for example. These earthquakes are estimated to have been the largest to have ever occurred in America. But it is not remembered as a great disaster because then there were few people living in the area, few man-made structures. If it happened today, it would cause terrible damage because of the much

larger number of people, the widespread use of un-reinforced masonry buildings, and low levels of mitigation and preparedness.

DL: What should we do differently?

DG: Typically we see only two phases of disaster: the response and recovery, after it happens. We need to think much more about what to do before

it happens, the preparation and mitigation phases. Among people who study disaster, the realization has been growing since the late 1980s and 1990s that people's decisions were causing the disaster. For example, to support farming, we installed dike systems on the Mississippi and other rivers. We thought we could control the water and expand the amount of land available for farming, so we destroyed the floodplains, failed to maintain the ecosystem. We created the circumstances for disaster. The 1993 flood along the Mississippi River happened because water exceeded the limits built into the dike system. Katrina is another illustration. Many professionals predicted it. People had built on the delta, which was the natural buffer to hurricanes.

DL: Do you think an opportunity was lost in the Katrina aftermath?

DG: Yes. Most promoted the idea of getting back to normal. But the normal situation was a basket of mistakes that set up the disaster.

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It is certain we will have hurricanes on the Gulf Coast. Here was an opportunity to start afresh, to ask the community: What do we want and how can we have it in a safe way?

DL: Have we learned anything from the recent disasters in the U.S. and abroad?

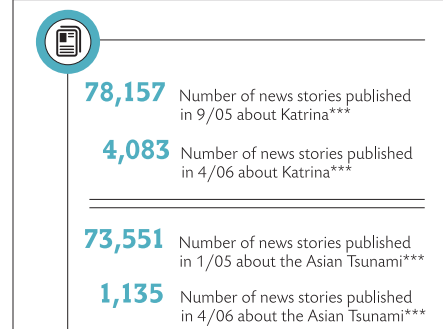
DG: We are learning more and more about how our values, beliefs, and behavior create the conditions that result in disasters when hazards erupt. People take risks with disaster because generally the government steps in and provides relief. But as the physical, financial, and social costs of disasters continue rising year after year, it is becoming apparent that the government lacks the capability to sustain a safety net. The government's ineffective response to Katrina underscores this point. We must promote local responsibility and sustainable hazard mitigation by investing in preparedness and mitigation safety measures now to help reduce future costs.

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We are learning similar lessons from the disasters abroad. Last year's Asian tsunami, the earthquake in Pakistan, and the recurring flooding in Bangladesh reveal that people in areas with frequently occurring hazards often evolve local time-tested strategies for reducing the impact of hazard events. At the same time governments and international donors sometimes introduce measures to reduce the severity



77% OF AMERICANS WANT TO HELP THOSE AFFECTED IN TIMES OF DISASTER**



* American Institute of Philanthropy, CNNMoney.com, 1/2/06
 ** American Red Cross Web site
 *** Dow Jones Factiva database

non-structural mitigation strategies such as flood-plain zoning.

DL: What has been the role of social work in disaster, and what should it be?

DG: When disasters happen, social workers are there to help in response and recovery. If they are to be effective in the aftermath, they need to be in on the mitigation and preparedness phases. I have been making that point for 25 years or more. In dealing with disasters it is increasingly important to be proactive, to anticipate, mitigate, plan, practice, and be ready to mobilize as needed.

DL: Are you seeing any progress?

DG: Yes, finally. I got into this in graduate school, and back then, disaster preparedness was not something social workers considered their business. After Katrina, students across the country started asking, what should schools of social work do? I was invited to speak to the National Association of Deans and Directors of Schools of Social Work. I explained how the skills needed in preparedness and mitigation overlapped with skills social workers have. Since this presentation, our School and the field have embarked on an important project that we hope will create new professional roles, educational opportunities, and eventually national and international capacity to better respond to these risks and crises.

It would be a tremendous resource for the country if social work recognized its legitimacy in providing assistance in all phases of disaster. Social workers learn how to work with the disadvantaged and how to establish and use community networks. If this had been done before Katrina, what a difference it could have made! The poor, who did not evacuate the city, might have done so. I think the deaths and pain would have been lessened. ☺