EDITORIAL
Social work in disaster intervention: accounts from the grounds of Sichuan

Natural disasters are a regular feature of China. On 12 May 2008, an 8.0 magnitude earthquake struck Sichuan province, a mountainous region in western China, in which nearly 70,000 people died, 18,000 went missing and affecting over 15 million people. Where physical infrastructures are concerned, 21 million buildings were damaged and 7,000 schools were destroyed.

As a helping profession, social work in Western societies has a long history in dealing with the aftermath of natural disasters such as hurricanes, tsunamis, earthquakes and snow storms. It has been well documented that social work is most effective in traumatic stress management, delivery of resources and services to vulnerable populations (Galambos 2005, Mitchell 1983, Van den Eynde and Veno 1999, Zakours 1996), formulation and implementation of different service plans (Banerjee and Gillespie 1994, Dodds and Nuehring 1996), community organization and advocacy (Pyles 2007). As Yanay and Benjamin (2005, pp. 263, 271) rightly concluded, responding to disasters is 'part of social work practice and profession' and 'social workers are the professionals best prepared to deal with complex situations resulting from an emergency'.

In the past, social work interventions in disasters have mostly focused on the work of relief and recovery for the affected individuals, families, communities and organizations, and meeting the special needs of vulnerable groups (Cherry and Cherry 1996, Shahar 1993, Zakours 1996). However, some researchers believe that provision of relief and services is far too limiting a role for social work as a profession. Certainly, disaster causes destruction, traumas and tragedies, but emerging from them are also opportunities for social change and development. As the UN Disaster Relief Organization (1992, p. 202) aptly commented, 'disasters often create a political and economic atmosphere wherein extensive changes can be made more rapidly than under normal circumstance'. Nonetheless, some argued that in order for a disaster-affected area to overcome the devastation it has experienced and to embark on a sustainable pathway to reconstruction, empowerment and participation of local community organizations and residents are critical (Harrell and Zakour 2000, Ozerdem 2003, Pyles 2007, Vandeventer 2004, Zedlewski 2006). In this context, Dominelli (2009, pp. 141–2) was correct to highlight that the role for social worker in disaster intervention indeed is multifarious – as facilitator, coordinator, community mobilizer, negotiator, broker and educator.

As a newly-emerged profession, social work in China, however, is much less prepared in responding to disaster intervention. Prior to the 12 May (or 5.12) Sichuan earthquake, social work intervention in managing disaster simply did not appear in the academic or practice agenda of social work training. Not surprisingly when the Sichuan earthquake struck, few social workers in China were ready for working with the disaster-affected communities. Later when they were called upon to engage in disaster relief, many felt they

were 'crossing the river by feeling the stones',[1] echoing the sentiment of uncertainty and determination Deng Xiaoping had when he first initiated China's economic reform in the early 1980s. Many sought to borrow from external experiences but others, including the authors in this special issue, have shown us that social work practices are contextualized and intervention approaches are different from their Western counterparts. In fact, immediately after Sichuan was hit by the earthquake, disaster relief was mainly defined as a government effort and responsibility, carried out mainly by the PLA (People's Liberation Army) and local officials, involving no social workers.

Given the circumstances, social workers in China faced tremendously difficulties, particularly when they initially did not have the legitimacy, nor the recognition from local community members as professional to engage in their practice. It is in this context we believe this special issue has a most important story to tell – that it is a story of courage and devotion in which social workers in China, like many other ordinary folks in the country at the time, were so deeply moved and motivated by the glimmers of hope in the midst of a large scale disaster that they were so willingly and without hesitation to commit themselves to the altruism and humanitarian principles to which they subscribed, doing their best striving to serve those were in need. At the same time, it is also a story about a professional turning point for social workers in China – that in the process of helping those who were in desperate need, they were able to assert themselves to forge a new professional identity through taking up a new mission and role, using what they have learned from Western sources, ranging from the strengths perspective to the asset-building-based approach (Green and Haines 2002, Kretzmann and McKnight 1993, Saleebey 2004) and applying them in a Chinese context with which they were none too familiar.

The story related to us by Zhang, Pei, and their colleagues, social workers who came from Guangzhou working in the township of Yingxiu is one such example. Written from a personal perspective, the paper illustrates well how, when working with local community, these social workers overcame a complex set of barriers, ranging from a lack of knowledge among the general public in terms of what social work is, to finding accommodation in a city of competing limited resources. It also vividly shows how they were able to build rapport with the locals, frequently being very patient and using creative strategies to holistically understand and assess the needs of individuals and communities in tatters before they embarked on a journey to develop appropriate interventions for those who were in need.

Timothy Sim, reflecting on what he has learned in the past year working with children in Sichuan from the perspective of a social worker from Hong Kong, has a similar yet different story to tell. What was similar between his and the others' experience working in disaster relief in China was that they all faced tremendous confusion and uncertainty about how they should best approach intervention in disaster relief in China. After 12 months, he has developed a clearer vision, which sees maximizing available local resources and allows support network to develop organically in the targeted community a most useful approach for fostering individual and community recovery from the disaster. Furthermore, he considers that being respectful and sensitive to local culture and community tradition of utmost importance not only because he recognizes himself as an outsider, but also because being a professional, there is every expectation that one should be ethical and responsible.

Tao Chen's paper provides another personal account of his journey into disaster relief, but it is also a courageous tale about his unexpected and 'accidental' venture into a new social work arena, as mediator, ameliorating the growing tension between the government and the angry parents who had lost their children during the earthquake and who failed to

get a satisfactory explanation from the government as to why so many school buildings had collapsed and had their children buried under the ruins after the quake hit. In this paper, he presents frankly not only the social and political backdrop that led to the unfortunate volatile situation, but also candidly, despite the constraints imposed, how he, along with his team members, had to find ways to mediate the volatile post-disaster situation where local suspicion and distrust towards the government had become almost unmanageable. His paper echoes what Dominelli (2009, p. 150) has aptly highlighted, that social workers should not only be aware of the tensions and social divisions in the communities they work with, so that they can prevent from distorting relief and rehabilitation efforts in disaster intervention; but also ensure that specific steps are taken to protect the disadvantaged receiving their rightful entitlements in spite of their secondary status. Chen knew the feeling too well, as he acknowledged what he and his team had accomplished in fact was limited. Still, there was reason for him to remain optimistic because he saw a new page had turned for social work in disaster intervention in China.

Equally illuminating is the tale from Meiping Fei and Eliza Ip who were working in a community of temporary shelters in Dujiangyan. They found a different approach in finding their niche in delivering disaster relief – they were more explicitly siding with the government in their work; and argue more realistically that unless social workers in China are capable in maintaining positive relationship with the government and have their services incorporated into the administrative system, it is difficult to implement effectively any disaster response or intervention plans no matter how desirable their objectives are. Otherwise, the efficiency of the community managing system will become questionable. To the authors, it is more helpful and preferable to adopt a group approach for reconstructing social relationships in post-disaster community reconstruction.

Taiyong Chen, country director of Heifer International, an INGO (international non-government organization) working in China, seems to toll a similar line. At first glance, his paper seems to offer only a personal account on how he worked persistently to convince the government of what his organization could do for the quake victims in post-disaster reconstruction. Upon closer reading, however, it becomes clear that he has a grander vision of development of INGO in China – that there is a real chance to see a civil society emerging in the country; but in order for it to grow and prosper, it is not sufficient to only overcome the traditional barriers that exclude NGOs and INGOs from participating in disaster relief through building personal and institutional trust; instead, these organizations must also face up to other important challenges, including how they should professionalize themselves, with better management, more transparent accounting systems, forward looking planning, and finding their own resources rather than relying on traditional sources of funding.

Finally, there is one more tale to tell. Twelve months after the earthquake, how well did the general public in the affected communities know about social work and social workers? And what were their perceptions of the profession and the practitioners? Based on the results of two surveys Huimin Bian and her colleagues conducted nine months after the earthquake occurred, they found that members in the community finally came to know the difference between a psychologist and a social worker, and what social work actually entailed. This is certainly comforting for social workers in China who have been striving to impress the general public of their professional identity, particularly when what they had to go through in gaining recognition has not been entirely smooth sailing working in disaster relief.

For many readers in the West, these accounts from the grounds of Sichuan may not seem extraordinarily inspiring, perhaps because no one in the Western world would think

twice about whether social workers and NGOs should be allowed to take part in a large scale disaster relief. Their participation has always been assumed rightfully automatic. However, for the Chinese counterparts, the accounts presented here should have additional special meanings – for those whose work constrained, they should see joy, excitement, promises and optimism subtly or not so subtly hinted in the experiences shared in this special issue. For those who are doubtful about how far social work could grow and prosper in China, they should now feel celebratory when they see how their Chinese compatriots have, against all odds, been able to seize the opportunity to demonstrate that they have the capability to carve out a professional niche, making a lasting impact on the Chinese post-disaster intervention system and fulfilling their mission of helping those who are in need.

The Wenchuan earthquake is undoubtedly a monumental disaster but it is also a time when strength is needed rebuilding and recovery. The quake victims have shown resilience and solidarity while social work practitioners have also responded with vigour and imagination. The social work practitioners have demonstrated persuasively to both the government and the general public what they are capable of in disaster intervention, but more importantly, they also have found a new identity for themselves.

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Note

1. See Pei and Sim's papers in this issue.

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