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# A Sociological Study of Volunteer and Social Work in Post-environmental Disaster Management:

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## ABSTRACT

Even if the volunteerism and social work are two different aspects, they have been functioning together as a formal or informal mechanism of social charity or philanthropy among Sri Lankan. The practice of volunteerism and social charity date back to a long history and it has become an integral part of Sri Lankan cultural and religious life. This paper is based on the sociological study of landslide occurred on 17 May 2003 at Diyadawa, Deniyaya in Matara District and its post environmental disaster management activities. This disaster killed around 150 persons and rendered many people homeless and dependent.

The main objective of this study is to critically assess the task of volunteerism and social work in post environmental disaster management process of Deniyaya landslide. An explorative methodology was used to inquire the qualitative and subjective aspects of post environmental disaster management based on the case study method. For this purpose, thirty questionnaires were administered in order to collect relevant quantitative data through purposive sample. The qualitative data were collected from ten cases based on snow-ball sampling and informal discussions from the volunteers and social workers. All the available relevant documents and secondary data were reviewed and data were mainly analyzed qualitatively.

This study reveals that although the material needs of people were fulfilled under the post disaster management conditions, the culture and psychological background of affected people were not properly

understood by any volunteerism or social work. People who were involved in the charity works were also affected by the bereavements of affected community and as a result, the volunteer mode of charity works became dominant and crucial instead of professional social works. The volunteerism practiced after the Deniyaya landslide was mainly rooted in the religious philanthropy and informal types of social works. It was observed that even though affected community required "recovery" stage of social works, the rehabilitation methodology was only used in the post disaster management. Moreover, the rehabilitation process was strongly politicized through the state institutes and political organizations. Finally, it is obvious that the volunteerism played the key role in the post environmental disaster management of Deniyaya landslide through the social philanthropy and the local power relationship in place of social works.

**Key Words:** Volunteerism, Social Works, Social Philanthropy, Post-environmental Disaster

## **Introduction**

This paper attempts to explore the role of volunteerism and social works in the post- disaster management mainly from sociological perspectives. For this purpose, the landslide occurred in Diyadawa at Deniyaya Matara was taken as the case of study and its post-disaster management process was critically and sociologically analysed. Thus, the main objective this paper is to assess the task of volunteerism and social work in post-natural disaster management. The socio-cultural, political and gender aspects in terms of post-disaster environmental management and its link with role of

volunteers and social workers were analysed based on the theories and concepts of social works and sociology.

Geography and sociology have dominated the field of disaster research since the 1950s and have emphasized the environmental and behavioural aspects of disaster. The findings on existing sociological literature are the significant contributions to the conceptual typology of sociological disaster research. Drabek (1986) identified different areas of concern in disaster research such as planning, warning, evacuation, emergency, restoration, reconstruction, perceptions and adjustments.

The earliest human beings learned to adapt to their surroundings, deriving food and shelter from their surroundings. With time, they began to understand the patterns of weather and climate and deified certain natural phenomena, particularly natural disasters which evoked both fear and curiosity. As defined in the Oxford Dictionary, natural disasters are natural events that can cause immense destruction and loss of life. Similarly, Drabek (2005) defines a natural disaster as a situation that causes a certain population to face hardship and damages property, earnings, and resources beyond recovery. It is through this understanding that it has been chosen to introduce disasters, one of the main variables in this study. It is believed that topic is relevant to today's contest where natural disasters are occurring worldwide with increasing frequency and are reported to be one of the leading causes of deaths worldwide.

Disaster Management is a key concept that has come to be closely linked with natural disasters. The theoretical basis of disaster management is important

in helping social workers in aiding the victims of disasters to recover from the calamity and cope up with their new reality. Natural disasters are inevitable. While some disasters occur suddenly, others can be predicted. By predicting natural disasters before they occur, it is possible to take steps to mitigate the damage they cause. This is one of the major steps in disaster mitigation. According to Darmasena (2008), there are three major stages in disaster management that run parallel to the disasters.

1. Pre-disaster management
2. Disaster management that takes place during the disaster
3. Post disaster management

This study focuses on the third stage, post disaster management and the social worker's role in the process of rebuilding the country and assisting communities to recover. The other main variable in this study, the role of the social worker, is understood differently in various cultural contexts in society. Within the broad area of the role of the social worker, it is chosen to specifically focus on the role of the social worker in connection to natural disasters. In understanding the role of the social worker in relation to disaster management, the school, family, leadership, the rural population, and disabled persons are considered to be crucial categories. In an age during which natural disasters are rapidly increasing, it is essential to understand disaster management and the role of the social worker. In fact, in the current context, the social worker is seen to be an essential part of society.

Volunteerism is an altruistic activity

or practice of people working on behalf of others without being motivated by financial or material gain. It is an engagement based on free will, commitment and solidarity, with greater support to social development through economic and social services, promotion mutuality among people and contributing to social cohesion. Sri Lankan volunteerism is based on long history and culture of its own (Rasanayagam, 2002). The origin of Sri Lankan volunteerism dates back on early human settlements of the Pre-Christian era (6th Century B.C) based on Buddhism. The all four religions and religiously formed philanthropy has been promoting volunteerism. Sri Lankan volunteerism was linked up with social movements (Sarvodaya), social services (Mental health programs), political activities (Samurdhi / Janasaviya) and NGOs (social work). Although there are very few proper empirical studies on volunteerism in Sri Lanka, some literature on the practice of volunteerism in Sri Lanka has revealed the significance or role of Sri Lankan volunteerism as follows.

1. Volunteerism is still a vital part of Sri Lanka culture and encourages social cohesion
2. It contributes to positive character building with leadership and collective commitment
3. Complements development activities of the state
4. Adds value to social capital with efficient social services
5. Develops a sense of social responsibility & interactive learning and sharing with networking and partnership.

6. Provides a sense of self-satisfaction in spiritual ways

According to "The Institute for Participatory Interaction in Development" (2001), there have been several types volunteerism found in the Sri Lankan historical context, they are Individual volunteerism (self-satisfaction, religion), Mutual aid or self-help (ageing people, death welfare, poverty alleviation, school subsidiaries,), Philanthropic services to others (war-victims, women's need, cancelling), Campaign and advocacy (social justice, environment related activities) and Participation & self-governance (Political rights, civil society).

The social work profession has long been involved with disaster relief, both through the profession's roots in the provision of wartime relief, and its concern with the physical environment of people. In the social work perspective, the environment is included among the physical, biological and social factors influencing the welfare of individuals, groups, and populations. Since the late nineteenth century social workers have intervened in the microenvironments of people to improve their health status, residential living environment, workplace conditions, and social and psychological functioning (Zakour, 1996).

A central concern for social work is facilitating access to needed services. The mission of the social work profession includes creating linkages between vulnerable populations and service systems, and creating linkages among service systems to make resources more accessible to people (Minahan & Pincus, 1977). This is of particular importance to disaster services in social work because

the populations most vulnerable to disaster are often protected by fewer mitigation projects and served by fewer disaster relief organizations with relatively low service capacities (Zakour & Harrell, 2003).

The use of volunteers for service delivery has historically been an important issue in social work. Social work research on disaster volunteerism represents a significant contribution to the disaster literature. Volunteers are often engaged in multiple roles in disaster social services. One important role is facilitating psychological debriefings using a social work strengths-based perspective. Though professional social workers have strong psychotherapeutic skills in group settings, volunteers can help facilitate group processes while reducing the social distance between facilitators and debriefing group members (Miller, 2003). The level of volunteerism of disaster organizations is operationalized as the percentage of volunteers among an organization's total staff, and the types of appreciation shown to volunteers by the organization. Volunteerism has been shown to increase the capacity of organizations to provide disaster services, which in turn increases an organization's geographic range of service delivery (Zakour, 1994).

### Methodology

An explorative methodology was used to inquire the qualitative and subjective aspects of post environmental disaster management based on the case study method. The questionnaire method is found very useful in understanding the field situation and collecting basic quantitative and qualitative information. Since this study was very much sensitive and politically and culturally critical

it was necessary to have a survey and acquire basic data and information about the field through questionnaire. For this purpose, 30 questionnaires were administered on households at Diyadawa Deniyaya. Since there are limited numbers of houses related to disaster of landslide, purposive sampling method was more convenient and efficient in selecting respondents from different socio-economic backgrounds. Factors such as employment, monthly income, residential patterns, neighborhood, gender and age were taken into consideration in selecting sample for household questionnaire survey.

The qualitative data were collected from ten cases based on snow-ball sampling and informal discussions from the volunteers and social workers. The informal discussion was a very important qualitative data collection technique. The case studies and informal discussions were useful in identifying the underlining root causes of problems related to post-disaster management. For these informal discussions, respondents from every walk of life including students, women, elders, religious priests, consumers, traders, workers, volunteers. All the available relevant documents and secondary data were reviewed and data were mainly analyzed qualitatively. Although quantitative data were collected from the field, the qualitative data and information were chiefly used for this paper considering the sociological and subjective assessment of post-disaster management process.

## **Results and Discussions**

Among the findings of this study, the psycho-socio impact of disaster on people is very crucial during the post disaster

management. Death, injuries and any property damage to any close relatives or neighbors by a natural disaster make the people shocked or distressed. . The sudden break out of any natural disaster always bring kind of trauma conditions among the people whose relatives or friends become victim of natural disaster such as flood, cyclone and landslide (De Silva, 2005). According to the field data collected from the Diyadawa area and some secondary information people after any natural disaster are traumatized with the feeling and emotions such as fear, shock, bereavement, disappointment, brotherhood, collective conscience, vulnerability of life and divinity (Sahani, 2003). In accordance with the belief of people in terms of landslide at Diyadawa, the divine wrath is supposed to be associated with the natural disaster or people believe that god punishes people from time to time through the natural disasters, when people behave like inhuman way or go beyond the divine tolerance. As results of such post-disaster trauma caused by Diyadawa landslide, people became physically sick, kept on crying for long time, lost their body weight and left from the place of living.

People in Sri Lanka from time immemorial have been engaged in the process of supporting the persons who are subjected to any disaster without referring to the any meaning or the concept such as social work or volunteerism. Extending of mutual support to the affected people mostly in an informal way has become part and partial of their culture. It is possible to observe that Sri Lankan charity or philanthropic works at a time of disaster or post-disaster conditions were mostly based on rather volunteerism not in terms of social works. It is obvious

that Sri Lankans did not practice the professional social works until recent past. As it was mentioned, when people are dead or injured by a natural disaster, their relatives and neighbors are not in right psychological position to carry out the social works or professional volunteerism. Although volunteerism based charity or philanthropic works were well established into Sri Lankan culture, the professional social works were in need of charity and philanthropic works.

Abesekara (2005) states that Sri Lankan society felt the need of trained social works after the 2004 tsunami devastation. Although the post-tsunami disaster management promoted the long term requirement of social works, the volunteerism is found to be still strong even in the contemporary charity and philanthropic works attached to post-natural disaster management. However, social works has become popular and many charity organizers, non-governmental organizations, universities and government are more concerned about trained or professional social workers in order to have effective and efficient post-disaster management. Boehm Werner at his book of "Nature of Social Works" (1958) expresses that social works is still new and developing area specially in the post-natural disaster management. According to him, the responsibilities of the social worker are (1) re-establishment of lost or diminished skills, (2) coordination of relationship between the person and society and (3) prevention of social inactiveness.

The other most important factor is that subjective or contextual understanding of local culture by social workers during the post-disaster management period.

It is crucially important to have broader and subjective understanding about the sub-culture of local community who were affected by the natural disaster. The local language and other dialects of affected community also need to be integrated to the whole process of disaster management, and volunteers or social workers should be familiarized with the local language. For example, people in Deniyaya area have been having the culture of their own and using specific local dialects at their day-to-day life. The system of belief, ritual practices and local worshipping pattern of god in association with local community have to be understood and respected throughout the post-disaster management process. It is important to mention that volunteers and social workers need to understand the traditional rituals and practice of magic which can be strong mode of social control mechanism of human behavior at local grass roots level.

The cultural attitude and psychological perception of dirt or pollution is very important in post-disaster management practices. According to Marry Douglas (1966) what makes things dirt or clean is based on the moral order of a society which periodically renews and reaffirms its basic relations and collective sentiments. When it came to the management process of refugee camps and providing dress and food to affected people, the perception and practice of notion of dirt and purity found to be very significant in Diyadawa post-disaster management. According to Mahees (2013), the notion of dirt or pollution of locally displaced people (IDPs) at Menik Farm Chettikulam during the last stage of North East war in 2009 negatively influenced the disaster management process. In addition to

new refugee culture with congested IDP camp neighborhood negatively affected the notion of dirt of these IDPs. These particular socio-psychological conditions disarticulated and confused the favorable aspects of cultural notion of dirt of IDPs. Thus, it was observed that concept of dirt and purity was crucial in post-war disaster management of refugee camp of Menik Farm Chettikulam. According to the qualitative data collected from the field of Diyadawa, the specific local culture or traditional beliefs and rituals were not fully utilized for the landslide post-disaster management process.

The gender relationship is another decisive factor which always positively and negatively influence on post-natural disaster management. Here, the gender factor affected people and persons who are involved in the disaster management process. It was revealed that the concept of was not properly utilized by the volunteers or social workers in the post-disaster management process of landslide disaster at Deniyaya. Although women are good in carrying out some relief and supportive works immediately after a disaster, it did not happen in the expected way. Men were powerful and more active in the field with their patriarchic background. For instance, in many of the immediate relief works, male soldiers are employed with the military and patriarchal power. The employment of military personnel for post-disaster management activities is another new area need to be critically studied through sociology of disaster management perspectives. However, it was the women who informally performed many post-disaster management activities within the formal structure and in rather unorganized manner at grassroots level.

Whatever the welfare or development program in developing countries, they are more or less politicized. Even the post-disaster management process is found no exception in this regard. The power relationship or power structure that involved with disaster management process must be understood in broader and subjective way in the Sri Lankan socio-cultural and political context. In addition to individual charity or philanthropic activities, the post-disaster management carried out by both government and non- governmental organizations are politicized and causing too many issues in terms of power relationship between the affected community and social workers. When it comes to post-disaster management of Diyadawa landslide, it was found considerable power related issues at the local set up. Whatever the charity, relief, aid program carried out during the post-disaster period, they were under the considerable influence of local power structure. The local authority, ground level state administrations and non-governmental organization all had their own political agenda and favourism. Even though affected people in Diyadawa received some benefits, there were corruptions, influences and malpractices which disturbed the real sense of volunteerism and social works.

### **Conclusion**

A sociological study of post-disaster management has important implications for numerous aspects of volunteerism, social work and policy planning. The empirical researches on this nature always minimize the cultural differences and inequalities in post-natural disaster management. People in Sri Lanka have been attached to many charity and philanthropic works based on their long



lasting culture and Buddhism. People are more convenient and involved with sort of informal and non-rational practice of social volunteerism. They are mostly promoted and encouraged to engage in charity works by spiritual satisfaction and religious teaching. Although Sri Lanka needs to uphold practice of social works, the volunteerism is still popular and being used by all in many of post-disaster management programs. Also, whether it was volunteerism or social work, the major post-disaster management activities of Deniyaya disaster in 2003 was based on charity and philanthropic

works. The volunteerism practiced after the Deniyaya landslide was mainly rooted in the religious philanthropy and informal types of social works. The rehabilitation process was strongly politicized through the state institutes and political organizations. The socio-cultural and psychological aspects of affected people were properly understood by disaster management process. It is always advisable to develop professional social works without disturbing the practice of volunteerism with the right sense of cultural background and power relationship of affected areas.

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