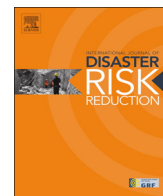




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Young people from refugee backgrounds as a resource for disaster risk reduction



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ABSTRACT

Young people from refugee backgrounds represent an important resource for disaster risk reduction within their respective communities. This paper presents a qualitative study with young people from refugee backgrounds and their experiences of the 2010–2011 Canterbury earthquakes in New Zealand. The interviews and focus group discussions with these participants highlighted their capacities as cultural brokers and mediators, as they ensured that their respective communities had access to disaster related information that was translated and interpreted. Thus, young people from refugee backgrounds represent a bridge that can connect people from their ethnic communities to key disaster information through their linguistic capital, digital literacies and social networks to support the recovery process. As part of the recovery effort, these young people also emphasised the need for more inclusive social and recreational spaces to be able to meaningfully participate in the (re)imagining of the city. This paper discusses how young people from refugee backgrounds can offer leadership within their communities and can play integral roles in disaster risk reduction.

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1. Introduction

The disaster literature demonstrates that young people have capacities that enable them to actively participate in disaster risk reduction and recovery processes [26,31,32]. Whilst it is increasingly recognised that young people can improve disaster preparedness and response, a significant gap remains in examining adolescent youth from refugee backgrounds, and the key roles they can play in their own communities. Ingamells and Westoby [17], p. 165] argue that “young people themselves bring resources, but the expert gaze often misses them.” This paper responds to this critique and presents a study that documented refugee background community perspectives of, and responses to, the 2010–2011 Canterbury earthquakes in New Zealand. The most significant earthquake occurred on February 22, 2011 that resulted in 185 deaths and millions of dollars of damage to buildings and key infrastructure, which destroyed much of the Christchurch’s central business district. Through the voices of young people themselves (defined as being under 24 years of age), this paper outlines the need for a greater recognition of the supportive and capacity building roles they can assume for disaster risk reduction by highlighting their linguistic capacities, digital literacies and roles

as cultural brokers with the wider society.

2. Disasters, diversity and young people: Vulnerabilities and capacities

A central consideration in the disaster literature is the interplay of vulnerabilities and capacities. Though at seemingly opposite ends of the spectrum, these two concepts are related, and include the associated material, cultural, social and political considerations that mitigate the ways in which a particular community experiences a disaster.

2.1. Vulnerability

Gaillard [13, p. 219] explains that vulnerability refers to the susceptibility of an individual or community to endure damage from a “potentially dangerous event, either natural, economic or political”. In a natural hazard context, relevant considerations of vulnerability depend on an individual’s and/or a community’s ability (or lack thereof) to foresee, manage and recover from a disaster [12]. Many of these considerations are relative to broader socio-political and economic forces where Donner and Rodríguez [7] note that people’s vulnerabilities are more strongly determined by social class, education, gender, age and language proficiency (amongst others) than the actual disaster itself. Within these wider considerations, young people are often labelled as

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“vulnerable” as they may be physically weaker than adults, dependant on others for their well-being and decision-making, and uninformed or unfamiliar with preparedness and safety procedures, which limit their contributions to disaster risk reduction [14,31].

In addition, numerous authors maintain that typically marginalised populations such as immigrant and minority groups are generally more vulnerable in disaster situations [7,30,1,41]. Minority communities tend to be less prepared for a disaster event, have fewer resources for evacuation if needed, and experience inequalities in access to aid and recovery assistance [8]. Communities from refugee backgrounds can represent part of this group where their cultural and linguistic diversity can create additional considerations for effective disaster mitigation.

New Zealand currently accepts 750 refugees on an annual basis as part of its resettlement programme. These people represent a wide range of ethnicities, cultural backgrounds, linguistic diversity and national identities. Whilst it is important to understand that refugees are not inherently vulnerable in disaster contexts, numerous factors (in addition to those previously mentioned) can increase vulnerability for this group. These include previous forced migration experiences, variable linguistic competencies, limited social networks (at least initially) and the need to adapt to new host society norms, customs and laws. In addition, new arrivals to the country will be less familiar with the natural and built environments, and the organisational structures for accessing assistance [38]. Mitchell [25] emphasises the importance of involving culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities in/with planning and disaster risk reduction initiatives/processes before a major hazard occurs as these events can exacerbate existing vulnerabilities.

For refugee background communities, language proficiency (most often English in resettlement contexts) is a clear barrier to receiving and accessing the correct information regarding disaster preparedness, mitigation efforts and associated responses. Donner and Rodríguez [7] explain that a deficit in linguistic capital can lead to misunderstanding hazard warnings, and can create difficulties seeking and applying for relief assistance following the disaster. This ‘deficit’ is closely related to and impacted by exogenous structural limitations which often assume that people are fluent in the host society language and therefore have access to information. Further, refugee and minority groups may maintain different social constructions on values than the wider society and state institutions. For instance, cultural beliefs and attitudes will shape how particular communities view the threat of a potential hazard, and therefore will affect how they prepare for a disaster and whether they take heed of government warnings and advice [21]. In the post-disaster context, distinct communities may identify and value different areas in need of attention and recovery efforts. Similarly, previous experiences with disasters and/or aid organisations will affect how communities react to, and welcome, relief aid from authorities [7,24]. Thus, disaster prevention agencies must develop ongoing relationships and partnerships with CALD/refugee background communities prior to, and during, disaster recovery, as well as integrate and include them in reduction and preparation processes.

2.2. Capacities

Whilst vulnerabilities often emerge from exogenous structural limitations and discrepancies, capacities primarily originate from endogenous resources to the community that include local skills, knowledge and solidarity networks [9,13]. According to Gaillard [13], the concept of capacities in disaster literature refers to the resources that individuals and communities possess to survive, manage and recover from a disaster event, and crucial to this

process is the ability to access and utilise these assets. Communities with proactive disaster mitigation plans are better prepared and able to access assets and cope with emergencies. Vital to risk mitigation is the ability to receive and interpret warning communications, thus individuals and communities must be able to understand the language (and level) of warnings and safety instructions [8,9]. However, information can originate from varying sources, as Fothergill et al.’s [12] literature review revealed: different ethnic communities received information from diverse sources and networks. For example, Mexican Americans utilised social “informal” networks, receiving information from family and friends who relayed advice based on events experienced in other countries. “White” Americans, on the other hand, were more likely to receive warning and response information from “formal” networks, and in the English language. They also found differences in the perception of credibility of sources (i.e., official sources vs. mass media). Therefore, discrepancies related to reliability and consistency can exist regarding where and how particular communities access hazard warning information.

In relation, young people can make important contributions to disaster risk reduction and recovery efforts in numerous ways. Peek [31, p. 18] lists children’s possible contributions throughout the “disaster lifecycle”, and these include: preparedness such as disaster drills, risk mapping and evacuation planning; response such as warning others, risk communication, translation of disaster materials and evacuation assistance; and recovery such as effective coping strategies, aid collection/distribution, and planning and rebuilding efforts. Wachtendorf et al. [45] examined three different initiatives undertaken in the United States, ranging from pre-school age to high school, in which young people were educated in preparing for disaster situations, and were seen to “serve as conduits for disaster mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery information dissemination, both among their peers as well as to other household members” (p. 457). The study argued that acknowledging young people’s social capabilities in disaster education can promote the resiliency of their communities in disaster situations. Therefore, because young people constitute an effective medium for relaying important disaster awareness and safety measures, they hold an important role in the area of disaster risk reduction [14,27,31,32]. This situation is especially relevant in cases where parents and family members do not speak the host society’s language. Young people from CALD backgrounds may represent the primary or only linguistic link with the host society.

For CALD and refugee background communities, young people can also offer connections to particular resources and social networks beyond their ethnic community. The migration literature typically demonstrates that children adapt to new cultural and linguistic contexts more quickly than their parents. Often, young people are needed to interpret and translate key messages for their family members and intra-ethnic community, and serve as potential cultural brokers with the wider society [33,44,6]. For instance, Mitchell et al. [24] presented two case studies showing how young El Salvadorians responding to multiple natural hazards (earthquakes, hurricanes and landslides) and Vietnamese youth reacting to Hurricane Katrina provided valuable roles as mediators between their respective communities and external forms of support. Because young resettled refugees are able to learn a language and a culture relatively quickly, they can become the communication and cultural bridges between their ethnic community and the host society. However, Correa-Velez et al. [5] highlight that in Australia, programmes and policies for resettled refugee youth generally “fail to recognise and build on the considerable resources these youth bring to their new country and miss opportunities to develop their leadership potential” (p. 1399). This paper examines the resources that young people from refugee backgrounds utilised in responding to the Canterbury earthquakes,

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