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Coping strategies identified and used by victims of flood disaster in Kolonnawa area: An analysis from a social work perspective

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Abstract

Kolonnawa was one of the main cities which had been affected by heavy floods in year 2016 which made residents of that area refugees for a few weeks. This study was aimed at examining the coping strategies identified and used by the victims at individual and community levels. Since social work perspective is used by the researcher to carry out the research, sub objectives of the study were to measure the already used coping strategies within a social work perspective and to identify differences between community based coping strategies and state interventions. The research problem addressed the coping strategies identified and used by victims of flood disaster in Kolonnawa as individuals and as a community. The research questions used to gather data and information were: (1) what were the coping strategies identified by each victimized household? ; (2) what were the steps taken at the individual level? ; (3) what were the steps taken at the community level? ; (4) what else could have been used as coping strategies? and (5) what would be the role of the social worker in such a post disaster context. Since the study used a qualitative approach, data and information were collected from 15 heavily affected households in *Egoda* Kolonnawa and *Megoda* Kolonnawa where convenience sampling method was used as the sampling method. 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected 15 households which included affected people from diverse backgrounds ranging from gender and age. Thematic analysis method was used as data analysis method. The main argument developed through the data and information gathered in this study was that there were different coping strategies identified and used by flood victims in reactive and recovery phases during which appropriate and effective state interventions were absent and it resulted in victims becoming dependents due to loss of material possessions where empowerment and resilience within affected community were also not present as coping strategies which should have been considered through a prism of Social Work.

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1. Introduction

Natural disasters are highly increasing in the developing world where citizens become victims. Sri Lanka being categorized as a developing country has to deal with natural hazards in the contemporary context. When considering the 2016 flood disaster, major parts of the country were damaged and citizens were displaced for a few days or weeks due to unavoidable hazards. Kolonnawa was one of the main suburbs within Colombo district which was highly affected by 2016 floods. In the first phase, the runoff of the *Kelani River* has mainly led to inundations in Kolonnawa. However, other reasons such as inadequate waste disposal and drainage systems, lack of proper waste disposal, the filling of marshy lands for development projects and filling of lowlands for construction have also caused the flooding in suburbs of Colombo including Kolonnawa and the surrounding area. As reported by the Irrigation Department (2016), one of the reasons for flooding was the city's inability to absorb water because most of the marshy or wetlands in and around Kelaniya had been filled for building houses or other construction purposes. The lack of pumping stations along the *Kelani River* to pump out additional water was also an issue as one officer reported. Further, it was the first time in history all irrigation tanks have such a large supply all over the country. During the floods in 1989, it was reported that reaching of 7.8 feet of water level led to flooding. Ironically, in 2016 though 7.3 feet has been reported as the level of water, the catastrophic flood disaster occurred and around 185000 people were displaced and suffered. According to the Disaster Management Centre (DMC), 64 deaths have been reported island wide and 131 were declared missing from the landslide in Aranayake. More than 425, 000 people belonging to 100,000 families have been displaced with nearly 320,000 people living in shelters due to the devastation caused by floods, landslides and heavy winds in 22 districts. In other words, major parts of the country where 16 out of the total 25 administrative districts were affected by floods, landslides and heavy winds in 2016.

In this backdrop, Kolonnawa was one of the suburbs which has been highly affected by floods within city Colombo. It is reported that around 38 *grama niladhari divisions* (*grama niladhari division* is the lowest administrative division within a divisional secretariat) were affected in Kolonnawa. The floods hit Kolonnawa on 15th May and continued till 18th May 2016. During this period the highest rainfalls in Sri Lanka has also been reported. People were displaced for weeks and lived in camps. It took a minimum of 14 days for displaced people to return and resettle in their affected communities. Given this context, researcher's attempt was to identify coping strategies driven within community level to reestablish the affected communities. The main argument developed through the data and information gathered in this study was that there were different coping strategies identified and used by flood victims in reactive and recovery phases during which appropriate and effective state interventions were absent and it resulted in victims becoming dependents due to loss of material possessions where empowerment and resilience within affected community were not really present as coping strategies which should have been considered through a prism of Social Work.

2. Research objectives, research problem and research questions

This study was aimed at examining the coping strategies identified and used by the victims at individual and community levels. Since social work perspective is used by the researcher to carry out the research, sub objectives of the study were to measure the already used coping strategies within a social work perspective and to identify differences between community based coping strategies and state interventions.

The research problem addressed was: what were the coping strategies identified and used by victims of flood disaster in Kolonnawa as individuals and as a community?

The research questions used to gather data and information were:

- What were the coping strategies identified by each victimized household?
- What were the steps taken at the individual level?
- What were the steps taken at the community level?
- What else could have been used as coping strategies?
- What would be role of the social worker in such a post disaster context?

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