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Strategies for Coping with Natural Disasters. A Study Of People's And Government Adaptation Process To The Flood In Poland

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ABSTRACT

The article will describe the results of the research conducted in 2013 on the people who suffered in the floods of 2010 in Poland. Within the frame of research 500 flood victims were surveyed and 25 individual in-depth interviews with the victims and support providers (mainly social workers) were carried out. The issues covered in the article refer to the description of the floods, i.e. difficulties associated with the occurrence of the disaster, the description of the received aid, the ways to get help - resourcefulness of the victims, etc. The obtained data show that the greatest financial support was provided by the representatives of local and government administration, whereas informational and emotional support was offered mainly by family and closest friends. People experiencing a natural disaster who had broader social support networks, stronger ties and more contacts received more help. The obtained data indicate that the flood victims are forced to demonstrate resourcefulness in three key points: 1) the evacuation, 2) the reconstruction of a household, and 3) getting control of their own and their families' mental condition. In addition, the author will present the results of social research carried out in 2016 on the operation of the administration during the crisis (flood).

Introduction

The flood that took place in 2010 was one of the biggest disasters in Poland in the last few decades. Water spilling out of the rivers caused large-scale destruction: flooded areas, damaged houses and public utilities, or damaged infrastructure - roads, sewage, etc. In addition, disaster results in immeasurable traumatic effects such as mental problems, anxiety, loss or lack of prospects (Noriss 2002, Kane 2003, Bonano et al. 2010). For those who experienced the floods, it was undoubtedly a test of how to deal with an emergency (Sitek 1997, Pasierbski 1999, Biernacki et al 2009, Knapik 2013, Knapik 2014). What seems to be the most important thing is the willingness and necessity to overcome the crisis situation (Skowrońska 2014, Szmagalski 2014), as well as restoring the pre-flood status quo and creating a sense of security (Ruszczewska 1999, Raimbaev 2004).

1. Data, Methodology and Analysis

1.1. Data and methodology from the 2013 survey

The article presented the results of two studies conducted by the author. The first study was carried out in 2013 within the framework of the project 'UR-Modernity and the Future of the Region' and was financed by the European Social Fund (4.1.1. POKL). The research gathered information from:

(i) 500 people who experienced the detrimental effects of the floods in 2010 - surveyed by means of a questionnaire survey. Deliberate sampling was used due to the scale of damage suffered by the flood victims from rural areas: Szczurowa (Małopolskie), Wilków (Lubelskie), Cisek (Opolskie) and municipalities: Sandomierz (Świętokrzyskie), Jasło (Podkarpackie) Bogatynia (Lower Silesia).

(ii) 25 flood victims and 25 people who provided assistance to victims - respondents answered the questions during individual in-depth interviews (IDI).

The study covered mainly the description of the floods and the support received by the victims. The most important research problems included: difficulties caused by a disaster, description of survivors and assistance strategies (Kinal, Wilk 2014).

1.2. Data and methodology from the 2016 survey

The article also included the author's findings from the study "Barriers and social assistance opportunities in the event of disasters and catastrophes DSH / 31/24/2016 " conducted in 2016. The study was financed thanks to the grant allocated to carry out research and development contributing to scientific progress of young researchers and PhD students at the Faculty of Sociology and History of the University of Rzeszow. The research material was collected from:

(i) 450 social workers from 450 social assistance centers- ComputerAssisted Telephone Interview (CATI). Deliberate sampling of respondents was used.

(ii) 3 Focus group interviews (FGI) with social workers providing support to victims of various types of disasters.

The study focused on defining how local social welfare centers operate in the event of various types of disasters or mishaps such as house fires, floods etc.

2. Results

2.1. Ways of functioning of social welfare centers

Local welfare centers employing social workers play an important role in Polish support system for people affected by various disasters. The law regulates the forms and types of support - from financial aid to providing temporary accommodation (Social Welfare Act, 2004). According to the research conducted in 2016, 54.5% of municipalities have been affected by a natural disaster, while in other municipalities (45.5%) no calamities have been reported in the last five years (2012-2016). Over half of the welfare centers (52.2%) have been supporting the victims of floods, fires, gales, landslides, gas explosions, etc. for the last five years. This ratio may be increased by a maximum of 1.8% since only in a limited number of welfare centers social workers had no record of the precise estimates. In the vast majority of cases, the victims were provided with financial support which was supposed to meet their basic needs. It applied to more than 92% of the social assistance centers, but very often (in case of almost $\frac{3}{4}$ centers) the funds were allocated for the renovation or reconstruction of residential units and farm buildings damaged as a result of disasters or mishaps. In more than 40% of centers where disaster events or hazardous incidents occurred, the victims were provided with professional legal and psychological aid, as well as more tangible support, which consisted in handing over building materials, equipment, furniture, etc. Temporary accommodation was provided to 22.2% of the victims of disaster events or hazardous incidents. It should be emphasized that in most cases, social workers claimed that such support was not actually needed, as some of the damaged buildings were fit for the tenants to live in, or the victims benefited from the hospitality of families and neighbors.

One should pay attention to the important aspect of the functioning of institutions supporting the victims. It is social workers themselves who are often victims of disasters such as floods. This is how one of the victims recounted her experiences in the study of 2013.

*“Well, but as I say three friends who lived in the area also lost their homes. Let's take for example a friend of mine who, fleeing the flood, was evacuated by soldiers and landed somewhere in Dobre village. She says that she suddenly stopped and realized that she was out there having absolutely nothing, not even a toothbrush or hairbrush to comb her hair and she had to come to work, you know, function normally, listen to these disgruntled people, and after all she was really no different from them, and she could not even say: ‘God I don't have anything either, and still I have to go to work this morning, come here and give all those people some support, work normally because no one will exempt me from my duties. Despite my own trauma and misery I still have to hear out misfortunes of others and it is not easy, you know, when people are resentful all the time because nothing can really relieve their misfortune and it is really nothing to be jealous of. These damages were gruesome but we were also really burned out.”*W_helper_3

In case of major disasters (floods), local social assistance centers are often supported by non-governmental organizations, private companies and individual donors. The problem that occurs in such situations is the lack of coordination of the received and provided assistance. This is mainly due to the fact that the center's infrastructure and its staff themselves often experience the devastating effects of the incident. A representative of one of the NGOs providing support describes the above mentioned situation as follows:

*“Unfortunately, it must be said that the aid was uncoordinated, in any way, none of our suggestions was considered, no institution had been designated as a coordinator of assistance from non-governmental organizations. And those who were more streetwise and resourceful, took whatever they could from any organization that came to help, so they ended up with e.g. 5 refrigerators and 4 washing machines in the attic, which are, nota bene, probably still standing there. A lot of people granted individual assistance would come and bring different things. Unfortunately, there was a lack of coordination both on the part of the municipality authorities, and the organizations themselves. There was no umbrella organization that would coordinate the process, so that the assistance would be more aimed where it should go.”*W_helper_2

Another important aspect of the functioning of social welfare centers is the pressure from the representatives of government administration, the media, the public and the victims themselves to make immediate compensation payments. A description of such experiences is provided below.

*“We were forced every day to send a report on what kind of support was given, and it was either by fax or e-mail but no one really cared that in our premises there was no Internet, for example. No one cared that we had no computer equipment or fax. And no one up there was interested how we would send this report. They simply informed us that a report must be sent before 2 pm, and the policy was like - 40 benefit payments was not enough, 60 was still not enough, we were expected to give more and more, faster and faster and to reach people more efficiently. Of course, we need to support people when the situation requires it, but the whole process of allocating support takes time- from interviewing people, decision making to preparing payment lists. I would say that logistically it overwhelmed us all. I honestly beat myself up and frankly admit, as a representative of institutions at the lowest level where we often had to deal with people's resentment and dissatisfaction, that we failed to avoid these errors.”*W_helper_3

2.2. Functioning patterns of residents

When analyzing the strategy of preparing citizens for floods, three main ways of doing so should be identified: preparation for the arrival of water, cataclysm survival, restoration of household damage and regaining mental balance. The results of the 2013 study show that the vast majority of people who experienced the flood were unprepared for it because they did not believe a catastrophe could happen. Flood victims pointed out to their past experience of great water, but they were surprised by the speed and the force of the disaster as well as the direction from which the threat came. This is how one of the victims of the flood recounts it.

“That was long, long ago, the legend says that long ago there were floods here, but even the oldest people did not expect that the water would flow in this way. At night, when we all went to bed. Before, some people had a premonition of flooding, some flooding; we have three firemen in the family, because my father was a commander, my husband is a firefighter and my brother, who is not living with us, as well. In the evening they went to see what the situation was like; and even in 2007, when the water was much higher, we were not endangered. But this time, before the flood, the water was relatively low, so we all went peacefully to sleep.”S_victim_1

Wherever possible, flood victims remained in their households on the upper floors. The victims pointed out to two reasons for staying in their houses. Firstly, the water flooded only part of the house so that they could still accommodate the rooms upstairs. In addition, staying in the house enabled them to guard the building and prevent possible thefts, which had occurred during previous floods.

„And with the experience of 1997, we knew that after the floods, when the water is gone, people from other areas would come. They were like gangs robbing people. So we knew that we could not leave the house which, for example, had a damaged door and could be entered easily. It was what happened to my parents - but for the dog which was on the balcony at night and alarmed my parents, they surely would have been robbed” C_victim_4.

In situations when the buildings were flooded to the extent which did not allow their residents to stay inside, flood victims sought shelter among their immediate families or got temporary accommodation offered by local governments. In case of complete devastation of the houses, which happened e.g. in the city of Sandomierz, the victims were accommodated in a boarding school in the Mokoszyn district and later moved to dormitories. Such situation may have lasted even 2 years for some families, until the destroyed houses were renovated.

In order to show the scale of assistance provided to the households affected by the floods, the respondents were asked what kind of individual and institutional support they had received in the following dimensions:

- (i) material and financial support
- (ii) informational support which involves providing counsel on dealing with the flood and its aftermath, requesting assistance, etc.
- (iii) emotional support (comfort, understanding, hearing out).

The highest percentage of victims (i.e. 81%) received material support from public institutions (municipal offices, social welfare centers). It should be pointed out that financial assistance was provided mainly by central and local government administration, usually in the form of allowances of up to 6 thousand PLN to meet the victims' vital needs and financial aid for renovation or reconstruction of buildings. (Supreme Audit Office, 2011). Secondly, the victims declared that material support was provided by the families (47.5%) and strangers (42.1%). As for getting help in matters of obtaining information and advice on how to deal with floods, a comparable percentage of victims could count on friends or family members and public officials (39% - 40.7%). Emotional support was provided mainly by the family (72.4%) and friends or acquaintances (63.4%). The distribution of support is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The scale of support received by the victims after the floods, both from individuals and institutions.

The source of support	N	Did the household receive financial or material support?			Did the household receive support concerning the information on how to perform certain tasks or to deal with issues related to coping after the flood?			Did the household receive emotional support?		
		Yes	no	not applicable	yes	no	not applicable	yes	no	not applicable
Family	495	47,5	35,4	17,1	39,0	36,4	24,6	72,4	16,7	10,9
Friends, acquaintances	492	33,9	44,3	21,8	40,7	34,1	25,2	63,4	21,3	15,2
Strangers (volunteers, religious groups)	483	42,1	35,5	22,4	13,7	54,7	31,7	15,5	48,7	35,8
Public institutions	484	81,0	14,1	4,8	39,5	34,5	26,0	13,0	48,5	38,6

Source: Own study based on research

The distribution of answers regarding the frequency of receiving individual forms of support from different individuals and institutions shows that family and friends assistance has been repeated several times while in case of strangers and public institutions it was usually one-off help. By way of example: repeated material help from family and friends was declared by about 35% of the victims, and in the case of strangers and public institutions by less than 11%. Repeated help in providing information and advice from family and friends was declared by more than 40% of respondents, whereas less than 20% reported being offered such assistance by strangers and public institutions. The obtained results coincide with what is presented in the literature on the subject, which describes the so-called "pyramid of help" (Wills, De Paulo, 1991), "with the family and friends forming the foundation of the pyramid, its broad basis which provides a solid and safe support, and formally organized agencies and aid groups at its narrow tip"(Kaniasty 2009: 53). Additionally, the results from IDI indicate a significant role of the family.

„The support here was family to family. Relatives supported very much. Neighbors helped each other. You would not have managed on your own and you could stop and break down at some point. You looked at it all and wanted to give up, you did not know where to start.”W_victim_1

„It is commonly known that family usually helps most in such situations. At that time we kept getting phone calls from closer, extended family and even friends from whom I did not expect calls, they all tried to lift us up, reassured us that everything would be fine, and it was certainly more comforting than the help from a stranger.”S_victim_1

A detailed breakdown of the frequency of receiving support from various individuals and institutions is presented in Table 2.

Table2: Frequency of receiving particular forms of support from various individuals and institutions after the flood subsided.

The source of support	Did the household receive financial or material support?			Did the household receive support concerning the information on how to perform certain tasks or to deal with issues related to coping after the flood?			Did the household receive emotional support?		
	once or twice	a few times	many times	once or twice	a few times	many times	once or twice	a few times	many times
Family	33,6	30,6	35,7	23,3	34,7	42,0	7,5	27,3	65,2
	N=235			N=193			N=359		
Friends, acquaintances	29,9	35,3	34,7	17,5	36,5	46,0	9,9	33,7	56,4
	N=167			N=200			N=312		
Strangers (volunteers, religious groups)	63,4	25,9	10,7	42,4	37,9	19,7	24,0	44,0	32,0
	N=205			N=66			N=75		
Public institutions	74,4	19,7	6,0	46,1	39,8	14,1	57,1	25,4	17,5
	N=402			N=191			N=63		

Source: Own study based on research

Asking for help with restoring a household from the flooding requires a specific type of resourcefulness. The victims found it very easy to ask for material help, especially from members of their own families. When it comes to other people and institutions, the respondents often declared that it was relatively easy to seek assistance. Almost 35% of the victims said they felt awkward asking for financial help from strangers, and more than 28% felt discomfort when addressing their request to a public institution. The victims were more at ease to ask for advice and information. In case of over 42% of respondents, making such request was not a problem when it was addressed to family members or friends, and it was uncomfortable for only one in 10 victims to request their family members or acquaintances. The greatest percentage of victims felt uncomfortable asking for advice from a stranger (14.3% of the respondents answered it was very difficult or rather difficult). The request for advice to public institutions was awkward in case of less than 17% of respondents, and for 30.3% it was not a problem whatsoever. The request for emotional support was very easy or easy for the majority of the victims when addressed to family members or friends, and in case of requests to strangers and representatives of public institutions, almost one third of the victims felt a great discomfort. During the IDI with the victims an issue of greed came along (and thereby, to some extent, unethical resourcefulness of some victims). This was mainly due to a large scale of the assistance offered to the flood victims and the lack of coordination of assistance provided. This is how they described the above mentioned behavior.

“Greed - because some people took sacks of clothes, towels, domestic detergents. I had this friend who took so much of it that later she burned it in a stove in the winter. My daughter searched for clothes for me, and she took only the ones that fitted me and gave back the ones that didn't. Why would I store them? Someone might really need them. Also, when they brought blankets, people were fighting to get them and then, it turned out that they were selling them... In Mokoszyn we suggested writing down the members of each family, preparing lists and distributing donations on this basis. Later it was done this way and everything was in order. They may not have expected that people would be so greedy. Such situations could be observed virtually in every place. Later, as I said, donations were given out according to the list. Before that, there was nothing but bickering and trouble.” Sa_victim_1

“When the flood happens, everyone loves each other, they are all kind and helpful to each other. But after the flood (...) when some donations come and when they bring all these trucks with various things, this is where the problems begin. Because some people got this, and others got that. Also, at this point, I'm not saying that it applies to everyone, but it happens that greed takes over. It is simply human nature.” C_victim_1

In the situation where some people tried to tidy up their households, some flood victims but also the people who did not suffer in the cataclysm searched for ways to get help. As flood victims emphasized in the interviews, the advantage of the greedy people is that they have greater access to various sources and forms of support. What was also important was the fact that people with wider social support networks showed greater ease in asking for help. It should be pointed out, however, that every fifth person affected by the flood, trying to bring back the normal functioning of their household, was forced to take out a loan. The vast majority of them (91%) took out loans from the bank, the rest borrowed money at work, from family members, friends, or credit institutions (single cases - 11 people in total).

3. Discussion

Flood victims, who had broader social support networks, stronger ties and more contacts with others received more help. The advantage of such people is the fact that they have greater access to the various sources and forms of support. It was also not without significance that people with a wider network of social support showed greater ease in asking for help. The obtained results coincide with what is presented in the literature on the subject describing the so-called “pyramid of help”, in which the greatest support for victims is provided by family and closest friends. On the other hand, one-off financial support is mainly provided by public administration - formally organized agencies and aid groups.

The obtained data indicate that the flood victims are forced to demonstrate resourcefulness in three key points: 1) the evacuation, 2) the reconstruction of a household, and 3) getting control of their own and their families' mental condition.

Flood is a natural catastrophe that is very difficult to prevent; what can only be strived for is minimizing the damage. In the event of such a severe natural disaster, assistance from the government and local social assistance centers is essential. However, we must not forget to support local welfare centers to prevent burning out syndrome of social workers who very often experience a crisis themselves. It should be mentioned that the flood of 2010 brought about the clarification of the rules for carrying out community interviews in order to pay cash benefits to the victims. Establishing legal norms allows social workers to provide faster and more effective assistance to the victims.

Conclusion

Flood is one of the most common natural disasters. Mankind has been struggling with it from time immemorial. Floods are phenomena that are difficult to predict—they occur quickly and unexpectedly, tend to be violent and usually result in massive destruction. The flood that took place in Poland in 2010 turned out to be an unprecedented disaster, which had devastating consequences for the environment, society, infrastructure and economy. Both victims and representatives of public administration (local social welfare centers) sought different ways to minimize the detrimental effects of the disaster. The crisis management methods presented in the article may be further explored to better serve the needy.

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