Partnerships for Disaster Risk Reduction through Education and Training

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by

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The August 2014 International Disaster and Risk Conference (IDRC) held in Davos, Switzerland, underscored the necessity for collaborative efforts in disaster risk reduction and building of resilient communities.

This presentation focuses on a case study of such a partnership.
On April 27, 2011, the central and northern parts of the state of Alabama were hit by dozens of tornadoes. According to Samuel Addy and Ahmad Ijaz at the University of Alabama, 43 of the state’s 67 counties were declared federal disaster areas; 240 lives were lost; more than 2,200 were injured; and about 14,000 homes were either totally destroyed or declared uninhabitable.
Tuscaloosa County was one of the worst hit where an EF-4 tornado with winds of over 190 mph completely leveled numerous businesses and residential communities in the middle of the city.

After seeing the damage in storm-wrecked neighborhoods, President Obama said that he had "never seen devastation like this" and promised the residents that "we're going to make sure you're not forgotten."
This presentation describes how the University of Massachusetts Boston’s Center for Rebuilding Sustainable Communities after Disasters (CRSCAD), at the invitation of the University of Alabama’s Department of Educational Studies in Psychology, Research Methodology and Counseling, led a participatory community-based Workshop at the University of Alabama.
Abstract (cont’d)

- The Workshop was on *Rebuilding Sustainable Communities for children and their families after the April 2011 Tornado in Tuscaloosa, Jefferson County (Birmingham, Pleasant Grove and Fultondale) and environs.*

- The event took place in June 2011.

- The duration of the consultative and planning process was nearly 12 weeks.
The presentation explains how participants in that complex community/university partnership mobilized stakeholders in the affected communities to develop a Community’s Charter - a Child-Centered Action Plan for Disaster Risk Reduction by the community.
Alabama's location in the U.S.
Aftermath of Tuscaloosa Tornadoes
President Obama toured the tornado devastation in Tuscaloosa on Friday, April 29th 2011
2. Methodology

- Generally, post-disaster rebuilding planning is top-down, led and managed by bureaucrats and technocrats (officials of city, state, or federal government, and/or by an international agency, such as the United Nations).
Methodology

- But rebuilding is actually a bottom-up process, an individual task undertaken by individual homeowners and business owners: home-by-home, business-by-business, and block-by-block - and supported by centralized authorities especially with the provision of public infrastructure.
Consequently, the Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) methodology was used for this project.

Community members are the best suited to planning for their own community because, as noted in *The Broadmoor Guide for Planning and Implementation* published in 2007 by the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University:
Methodology

- They have the vision, knowledge and motivation;
- They are also the key drivers of implementation – they are the stakeholders willing to fight to bring their neighborhood back;
- They know that by taking ownership over their planning and recovery process, they also have to see it through to completion;
Methodology

- Those invested and empowered from the early stages will have the motivation to continue their involvement beyond the planning process and into the implementation of the recovery phases.
Methodology

Also as noted in their final Report, *Successful Models of Community-Based Participatory Research* edited by Liam R. O’Fallon, Frederick L. Tyson and Allen Dearry, community-based participatory research (CBPR) methodology has the following benefits, amongst others:
Methodology

- Enhances data quality and quantity, by establishing trust;
- Moves beyond categorical approaches;
- Improves research definition and direction;
- Enhances translation and sustainability of research findings;
- Increases trust from communities;
Builds and strengthens the capacity of community residents to address future (post-disaster) risks, through education, outreach and training;
Methodology

- Builds social capital (features of social organization beyond the level of the individual – such as collective efficacy, psychological sense of community, and neighborhood cohesion – which act as resources for individuals and facilitate collective action); and,

- Positively impacts (post-disaster) social, economic, or political policy.
3. Workshop Objectives

Introduction

There are generally two aspects to the impact of tornadoes: The Technical and The Human.

- The community-based workshop focused exclusively on the human aspects with particular reference to children, the most vulnerable members of the community.
Workshop Objectives

This community participatory workshop had three main objectives

- The first objective:

An assessment of the impact of the April tornado on the lives of children
Workshop Objectives

- The first objective of the community dialogue was to identify the impact of the April 2011 tornado on the lives of children and their families in Tuscaloosa, Jefferson County (Birmingham, Pleasant Grove and Fultondale) and environs; and, to examine the adequacy and efficiency of the networks that existed in the communities to deal with disasters in general and tornadoes in particular.
Workshop Objectives

The second objective:

- Community evaluation and prioritization of children’s needs in Tuscaloosa, Jefferson County (Birmingham, Pleasant Grove and Fultondale) and environs
2nd Objective (continued)

The Workshop identified, clarified and prioritized the needs of children before, during and after disasters

- To guide the development of an all-inclusive post-tornado action plan; and,
- For Disaster Risk Reduction in the future
Workshop Objectives

The third objective:

Based on the outcomes of objectives 1 and 2, the participants developed a Community’s Charter – A Child-centered Action Plan for disaster risk reduction by the community.
4. The Aim of the Charter

The aim of the Charter was to call the attention of all stakeholders to the following:

- The crucial role of women in alleviating poverty and assisting children, their families and their communities after disasters;

- The status of children and women in various communities after disasters and the continuing need for superior research and appropriate data;
The Aim of the Charter (cont’d)

- The roles of government and the private sector in creating and enabling a sustainable environment for the empowerment of families in the aftermath of disasters
- The place of children in local, regional and national post-disaster reconstruction policies, plans and programs
- The role and input of children in post-disaster reconstruction planning and implementation processes
The Aim of the Charter (cont’d)

- The promotion of human dignity in the creation of safe and sustainable environments that empower children and their families in the aftermath of disasters

- The participation of children in the development and execution of post-disaster plans and programs
5. Invited Stakeholders to the Workshop

- The community stakeholders included School Counselors and Principals from Displaced Schools in Tuscaloosa City and County Schools (Alberta Elementary, University Place Elementary and UP Middle, Holt Elementary, Tuscaloosa Magnet School Elementary and Middle Schools, Westlawn Middle School, Skyland Elementary);
Invited Stakeholders (continued)

- Central Office Administrators in Tuscaloosa City Schools (Superintendent, Executive Director of Personnel, Director of Elementary Education and Coordinator of Counseling);
- Central Office Administrators in Tuscaloosa County Schools (Superintendent, Deputy Superintendent, Director of Elementary Instruction, Director of Secondary Instruction, Coordinator of Guidance and Testing K-8, Coordinator of Guidance and Testing 9-12);
Invited Stakeholders (continued)

- President of the Junior League of Tuscaloosa (The Junior League was involved with a lot of tornado relief efforts and has a long-standing relationship with efforts at Holt Elementary School);

- State Representative in the Alberta City district (district 5) (as a conduit to communicating with the Governor and others in the state government);
Invited Stakeholders (continued)

- Tuscaloosa City Schools (Superintendent, School Board, Principals, Counselors);
- Tuscaloosa County Schools (Superintendent, School Board, Principals, Counselors), Tuscaloosa One Place;
- Tuscaloosa Government Officials (Mayor, City Council Members, County Commissioners);
Invited Stakeholders (continued)

- Government Officials from other affected cities;
- State-level Government Officials; National Government Officials from Alabama;
- Tuscaloosa Emergency Responders (Tuscaloosa Police Department, Sheriff Department, Fire Department, Tuscaloosa Emergency Services);
Invited Stakeholders (continued)

- Tuscaloosa Housing Groups (Tuscaloosa Housing Authority, Realtor’s Association, Home Builder’s Association, Home Renter Association);
- Tuscaloosa Chamber of Commerce;
- Rotary Club, and Junior League;
Invited Stakeholders (continued)

- Tuscaloosa Public Library;
- Non-Governmental Response Agencies (Red Cross of West Alabama);
- Church Leaders (Ministerial Alliance, Tuscaloosa Prayer Network/HOPE Initiative, other large and affected churches);
Invited Stakeholders (continued)

- University Student Groups; Local Colleges;
And,

- Pleasant Grove officials (Mayor, High school: principal, Counselors);
6. Developing a Community’s Charter and an Action Plan – The process

The use of this community-based approach to assess the impact of the tornado on the local communities and their needs for rebuilding:

- Provided a methodological framework for future post-tornado local development;
Developing a Community’s Charter and an Action Plan

This process:

- Ensured the economic, social and long-term sustainability of the implementation of the post-disaster development plan; and,
- Acted as a catalyst for an ongoing lively and substantive conversation on the future development of Tuscaloosa, Jefferson County (Birmingham, Pleasant Grove and Fultondale) and their surrounding communities.
7. Recommendations from Workshop participants:

Rebuilding Sustainable Communities for Children and Families after the Tornadoes
Recommendations from Workshop participants (cont’d)

The following was the signed statement and recommendations by the stakeholders:
8. Recommendations (cont’d)

Recommendations for Children and Families

- Each child (member of the family) should have a disaster kit that includes the following: 2 bottles of water, flashlight, whistle, helmet (bicycle, football, etc.), and identification necklace (dog tags) with name and address.

- Identify in the home the safest places for surviving a tornado, use signs in the home and identify back up locations (rank the safest locations in the home).
Recommendations (cont’d)

Recommendations for Children and Families

- Educate school personnel and parents on how to recognize signs of stress in children, even long after a disaster.

- A family disaster plan on where to go (meet) after a disaster with three options (identify first place, second place, third place if one place is destroyed or not available).
Recommendations (cont’d)

Recommendations for Children and Families

- Establish normal or as normal as possible routines as soon as possible after disaster
Recommendations for Schools

- At the beginning of the school year discuss with children and families putting together a disaster kit. Children and adults need to feel more control over their lives and this is a beginning concrete way to develop some sense of control in future weather events.
Recommendations (cont’d)

Recommendations for Schools (continued)

Principals (and the school system) should have accessible contact information for all children. It was suggested that there should be hard copies stored off-site and electronic copies. Electronic copies should be easily accessible online.
Recommendations (cont’d)

Recommendations for Schools (continued)

Need to get students back to school, even if family is incapacitated by the disaster and/or if bus system is not functioning. Achieving a level of normalcy helps with the recovery psychologically.
Recommendations for Schools (continued)

- Teachers need help coping after a disaster and counseling services should be available to them. A teacher who is stressed will pass along these feelings to children.

- Educate school personnel and parents on how children mourn and process death.
Educate teachers on how to listen to children’s concerns after a disaster.
Recommendations (cont’d)

Recommendations for Schools (continued)

Use understanding and acceptance of disasters as part of life. This may be accomplished by discussing tornados in science modules and inserting examples from recent experiences. Include how to best protect oneself during such a disaster. Use music to teach about safety (sing a song on how one can be safe during a storm).
Recommendations (cont’d)

Recommendations for Schools (continued)
When school is out (e.g., during summer), day camps can be set up for elementary children that are staffed by high school students and maybe supervised by college students who are training to work with children.
Establish a peer listeners program in schools. “Listeners” in general are a conduit to the mental health community. These could be student mentors (college student), the elderly who have received training in listening skills, or the faith community whose members have received training.
Recommendations for Schools (continued)

- Assist parents when school is not in session, e.g., establish day care centers, so that they can return to work, deal with salvage or rebuilding, etc.

- Develop plans for providing coordination for children who are homeless and a method of tracking after disaster.
Recommendations for the Community

- Important to have adequate housing, including mixed income/use housing. This is important in rebuilding and any additional new housing in communities beyond the damaged areas. Such an approach communicates support and respect for all members of the community.
Recommendations (cont’d)

Recommendations for the Community

Improve communications before and after disasters.

Periodically provide broad based communication about the following prior to disasters:
Recommendations (cont’d)

Recommendations for the Community

- designated storm shelters (updated yearly);
- alternative shelters (a shelter may be damaged or not available and more than one option needs to be identified);
- and information on family disaster kits.
Recommendations (cont’d)

Recommendations for the Community

- Use social media including newspapers, television, radio and other electronic communications (e.g. web pages, produce a CD with information on surviving a disaster, etc.).

- Communications should be distributed in both English and Spanish.
Recommendations (cont’d)

Recommendations for Schools (continued)

After disaster provide information about various resources available through multiple methods (e.g. newspaper, radio, television, word of mouth and encouraging community members to get to know their neighbors).
Recommendations for the Community

Encourage neighborhoods to get to know each other and who is living in various homes, apartments. This will help with checking for survivors and identification of those most severely injured.
Recommendations (cont’d)

**Recommendations for the Community**

Provide regular mental health evaluations to community members particularly within the first year after a disaster. This can provide opportunities for prevention of more severe mental health problems.
Recommendations (cont’d)

Recommendations for the Community

Include children and adolescents in the planning and development of rebuilding after a disaster. This will insure a good representation for addressing children’s needs and provide them with a sense of control and responsibility to the community.
Recommendations for the Community

- Encourage businesses, particularly restaurants, and stores, to clearly identify the safest location in the event of a tornado, use signs to indicate designated areas.

- Provide counseling services to first responders to address secondary trauma. First responders may be particularly impacted by injuries and death to children.
Recommendations (cont’d)

Recommendations for the Community

A “Community of Care” does not protect every resident of Alabama from injury in future weather events such as tornados but it can reduce the risk and impact. Alabamians have demonstrated the compassion and caring for fellow residents and this is an opportunity to move forward and reduce the discrepancies in risk and impact on the most vulnerable populations, children and families, particularly lower income families.
I wish to acknowledge the support of Professor Rick Houser, PhD, who invited me to conduct this workshop.

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I thank you