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Post-disaster Community Development in Rural Sichuan, China

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Abstract

An enormous earthquake hit Wenchuan County in Sichuan province of China on May 12, 2008. Since that time, we have worked together with the local community, implementing an alternative model of community development. This is an action research project that devoted to post-disaster community rebuilding, which not only restores local livelihoods but also creates sustainable economic development. This paper examines our role in disaster intervention, the theoretical background of new model, and the process of the intervention itself.

Keywords: China, rural-urban alliance, post-disaster community reconstruction, capacity and assets building, sustainable livelihood

1.0 Introduction

Many countries have been forced to deal with the devastation accompanying natural disasters, which in recent years have included the tsunami in Southeast Asia of 2004, the Mumbai flood in 2005, and the 2011 earthquake in Japan. China has been plagued by natural disasters – earthquakes, winter storms, floods, etc. The most recent major earthquake in China was the 5.12 earthquake, measuring 8.0 on the Richter scale, which occurred on May 12, 2008, in Sichuan province. It was reported that 45.6 million people were affected; of these, 15 million were evacuated from their homes and 5 million were compelled to live in temporary shelters (United States Geological Survey, 2008). After the 5.12 earthquake, the Chinese Government quickly took steps to rebuild the physical infrastructure of the disaster-affected zones, but the social reconstruction of the area in terms of psychosocial recovery and community reintegration was given relatively little attention. Our research is an attempt to fill this gap and to propose a viable model for social reconstruction.

Social workers are the “professionals best prepared to deal with complex situations resulting from an emergency” (Yanay & Benjamin, 2005, p. 271). A problem-centred approach is generally used in disaster-related social work interventions. It addresses the victims' problems individually, usually by means of therapy and financial assistance. However, for those affected, this approach contributes to a sense of hopelessness. It also neglects opportunities for positive change and improvement on a wider scale (Pei, Zhang & Ku, 2009; Özerdem, 2003; Özerdem & Bowd, 2009; Zhang, Pei, Ku & Yeung, 2011). In post-disaster interventions, the limitations of this approach are especially apparent because it does not take into account the multi-dimensional traumatic impact (physical,

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economic, social, cultural, and ecological) of natural disaster on people and their communities (Özerdem, 2003). To escape the limitations of the problem-centred approach, some social work researchers and practitioners have adopted an asset- and capacity-building approach, which focuses on the strengths of local people and their communities (Saleeby, 2009; Sherraden, 1991; Chaskin, 2001). This new approach attempts to rebuild the social and cultural fabric of disaster-affected communities, and to ensure their sustainable development through integrated economic, social, and cultural reconstruction (Pyles, 2007; Green & Haines, 2001).

Following the principles of the asset- and capacity-building approach, this research aims to

- generate indigenous approaches to disaster management and social reconstruction;
- develop a post-disaster social reconstruction model through a participatory action research process that emphasizes cultural sensitivity, community participation, and asset building;
- inform and influence the Chinese Government on policies and practices relating to disaster management and social reconstruction so as to expedite future social recovery processes; and
- build individual and community capacity for post-disaster social reconstruction in the affected area through the action research process.

This study represents the first time the participatory action research (PAR) approach was employed in disaster intervention on the Chinese mainland. The period of research covered five years—from the first assessment of the community needs and assets in a Sichuan township to the development of an asset-based community reconstruction model. In this paper, we will present the action research process, paying particular attention to the role of the social worker in disaster intervention, the theoretical background of our new intervention model, our attempt to forge a rural-urban alliance, and the challenges we encountered.

2.0 Field Site and Action Research Journey

2.1 Field Site

H is a township in Wenchuan county, Sichuan province. Before the earthquake, H township was an important centre of heavy industry in the region, with a population of more than 12,000, 6,641 of whom were native. During the 5.12 earthquake, H was the 'centre of the epicentre'. More than 9,000 persons lost their lives and 1,000 were wounded. After the earthquake there were only 2,300 survivors. Almost every family lost at least one relative during the disaster. Immediately after the earthquake the residents were moved to a temporary housing area near the original township to wait passively for government aid.

Forty-two days after the earthquake we² were invited by the Guangdong provincial government to join the emergency relief effort. Guangdong province was designated the supporting partner of Wenchuan county under the Chinese government's plan for the reconstruction. While we did not receive government funding, we did secure HK\$ 870,529 from the General Research Fund of the University Grants Council of Hong Kong and around HK\$ 1,000,000 from the

² Here, "we" refers to social workers and social work educators, including the author.

Zeshan Foundation. Our research team included three full-time social workers who were recent graduates from colleges in Sichuan; four social work educators from the Sun Yat-sen University and the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, respectively; and three social work students in volunteer positions. None of the research team members had experience in disaster intervention before the earthquake, but the social work educators had been actively involved in a number of extended community development projects and had wide experience in applying the participatory action research method in rural China.

When we came to H township we agreed that our aim was not to conduct conventional research but to assist the local people, build the capacity of the local community, and develop a disaster-intervention model that was appropriate to the Chinese cultural context and would be a useful example for social work education and for community long-term development.

2.2 Participatory Action Research

Our chosen method was participatory action research (PAR), which has been used by community workers to strengthen and support the capacity of communities to grow and change (Zuber-Skerrit, 1996; McTaggart, 1996). The primary goal of PAR is to create a more just society through transformative social change (Small, 1995; Park, 1993; Vickers, 2005; Reason & Hilary, 2008). Research is no longer seen as solely a means of creating knowledge; it is also a process of education, a development of consciousness, and a call to action (Small, 1995; Park, 1993, 1999; Reason & Hilary, 2008). The fundamental principles of PAR are that: First, participants (often peasant/poor/marginal people) are regarded as 'knowers' and their knowledges and experiences are valorized. Second, researchers temper their own 'expert' status, while not dismissing their own specialist skills, do not presume to have a superior perspective. Third, the agency of participants is recognized and encouraged (participants are encouraged to recognize their own agency) and researchers and participants enter into a reciprocal relationship in the research process (Kesby, 2000: 424).

The central feature of PAR, then, is that it relies on the people themselves to engage in the research process to the greatest extent possible (Park, 1999). Local people are full partners in the research process and are usually referred to as co-researchers (Gaventa, 1988; Streck, 2007; Schrujijer, 2006; Small, 1995; Park, 1999).

Our action research took place in stages. We began by establishing trust, gaining understanding of people's living experiences after the earthquake, and assessing their needs and local assets. We then encouraged local women to form a handicraft group, providing them with psychological support and launching short-term financial assistance programs. One year later, when the disaster relief work had reached the stage of community reconstruction, we began a second round of action research in H township. During this period, we developed a model of rural-urban alliance to support long-term sustainable economic development for the disaster-affected community.

Guided by the action research method our research team used different skills at different stages to engage in our activities and record our process. To learn about the needs and assets of the community we employed participant observation, in-depth interviews, and asset-mapping methods. Focus groups were used mainly to facilitate group discussions, explore ideas, and find strategies for action. When implementing community activities the participants' observations and informal feedback were recorded as field notes. Sometimes public meetings were held to encourage participants to articulate and share their sentiments. In-depth

interviews were also conducted with the local officials, community leaders, and selected representatives of various age groups (children, young people, adults, and senior citizens). All members of the research team were required to keep notes and record their reflections in journals. Women from the community were also recruited and trained to help with data collection. One of characteristics of action research is that data collection and analysis cannot be separated. We analyzed data on an ongoing basis and had discussions with the women's group at each stage to plan our actions. Our data, presented in the following section, are based primarily on our field notes and journals.

3.0 Our Practice in Disaster Affected Rural Community

After the earthquake the official large-scale reconstruction project focused on infrastructure. A school, hospital, government building, water supply facility, and cultural centre were established in every earthquake-stricken rural township. New stylish housing estates were built for villagers to purchase. However, as Ting and Chen (2012) point out, this state-led, growth-oriented model of reconstruction did not take the needs and concerns of local people into consideration. Government progress reports highlighted how many roads, highways, bridges, power stations, hospitals, schools, and houses were built in a short period of time. The reconstruction project became a showcase of the Chinese Government's efficiency and success. The villagers, however, were unappreciative of, and even resistant to, the government intervention. Throughout the process the villagers' core concern – their livelihood – had not been seriously considered or addressed. Most of the new housing copied the design of urban residential estates. The houses had two or three bedrooms on the upper floor, a sitting or a dining room and kitchen on the lower floor, and washrooms on both floors. However, they were built in such close proximity that the villagers had no space to raise livestock, grow vegetables, and store farming tools. The location of the houses meant that the villagers faced long journeys to their field; some had to spend two hours walking from their new home to their farming land.

3.1 Asset and Capacity Building In the Emergency Relief Stage

The community structure of H township was completely destroyed in the 5.12 earthquake. Adopting the strength perspective, we proceeded on the basis that the local people still had capacity and assets to put into practice during the disaster response. In our role as action researchers our first task was to listen to the voices of community residents and learn about their lives. We needed to establish a trusting relationship with local people before attempting any intervention. In the first two weeks we visited the families, made friends with community members, and listened patiently to their stories. These activities help social workers not only to build relationships with the community but also to identify assets and needs. On a visit to Z village, where a group of women had lost children and close family members, we discovered that most of the women of the Qiang and Zang ethnic minorities were skilled in traditional embroidery. Before the earthquake they had spent much of their time embroidering. Miss D, who lost two daughters in the earthquake, told us that she wanted to embroider her daughters' drawings as a keepsake because cloth would last longer than paper. The idea of forming a women's embroidery group suddenly presented itself.

We asked the local women whether they were willing to employ their skills to establish an embroidery group. The project would not only provide them with some income but also help to relieve their sadness. They would come together to do embroidery and support each other during this critical period. Working

on the embroidery would help to shift their attentions from the past to the present. The women agreed; they wanted to recover by themselves rather than depending on help from the outside. They also hoped the embroidery could be a source of income.

Very quickly ten women, ranging in age from 19 to 45, formed the first “H Mother” embroidery chapter. By the end of December 2008 five chapters had been established and about one hundred women had joined. Meanwhile, we searched for funding and markets for the groups and finally received support from the Young Women’s Christian Association in Chengdu, which donated 60,000 RMB to purchase several hundred pieces of the embroidery. On May 12, 2009, the first anniversary of the Sichuan earthquake, we organized a charity auction in Guangzhou and about 240,000 RMB was raised. We established the ‘H Mother Development fund’: All money raised was used for women’s development.

Our intervention in the creation of the embroidery group reflects our belief that co-operation is the key to capacity-building and empowerment. At the beginning, we played the roles of organizers and facilitators, mobilizing the women to participate. The next step was to foster the women’s capacities. We helped the women to clarify common goals and to help each other improve their embroidery skills, and we provided them with a start-up loan to purchase materials and tools. These achievements were all based on the co-operation between social workers and the embroidery group. All decisions, big and small, were made collectively and everyone was responsible. After a few months the embroidery group had acquired a team spirit. Group leaders emerged and there was a clear division of labour. The women found their role within the group according to their particular talents and abilities (e.g., product design, material purchasing, marketing, quality control, and financial records).

The women had a lot of plans for their own development like running a restaurant, building an H mother embroidery museum and so on; however, at the end of May 2009 H town was closed by the government for intensive reconstruction. Our project had to come to an end temporarily and all the original plans had to be stopped. We moved to another village called J village where we continued to implement our project of post-disaster community reconstruction.

3.2 Transformation From a Short-term Intervention to a Long-term Development Project

When we arrived at J village we also conducted an evaluation of our prior stage of action research. The evaluation made our team determine that the most important concern for local people was long-term livelihood development because the government’s financial assistance was temporary; they needed to find means for self subsistence in the long run. Inspired by Dominelli’s approach of green social work, since the middle of 2009 we have retooled our projects to long-term sustainable community development. We agree with Dominelli that disaster social work intervention should be culture and locality-specific; it needs to consider the links between the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainability (Dominelli, 2012). In J Village of C Township at Wenchuan County we mapped assets and assessed needs, finding that the local villages had affluent natural, ecological, geographical, and cultural resources. Together with the women we developed multiple livelihood projects, for example, embroidery production, eco-tourism, and organic farming. We adopted the ‘rural-urban alliance’ as our alternative development model and endeavoured to link up the urban community with disaster-affected villages. Through public education we helped urban residents understand the disaster-affected

communities, and to understand more about food security and organic farming. Our hope is that the urban community can become a partner for supporting the long-term rural development.

A rural-urban alliance should be mutually beneficial. Rural residents require economic support from urban communities; urban residents require the high-quality, organic food supplied by villagers. Fair trade and ecotourism profit both parties: they provide villagers with income and support for organic farming and cultural preservation, and, at the same time, they demonstrate to urban residents the benefits of green consumerism. Social workers play a critical role in forging rural-urban alliances by creating a bridge linking the two parties. In cities, social workers use the public education system to help residents understand the issues in disaster-affected communities, and to appreciate the value of food security and organic farming. In villages, they encourage producers to undertake organic farming to generate more income and protect the environment. The main objective of the model is to prompt the urban community to become a partner in the project of long-term rural development.

We extended the embroidery project after our return. In interviews with old women in the villages we discovered that there are rich cultural meanings associated with the common embroidery subjects. We collected the traditional stories about the scenes depicted in the embroidery and created a brochure. This not only helped to preserve the traditional embroidery culture but also gave urban residents a better understanding of these products' cultural value.

From June 2009 we helped the women in the embroidery group to improve their embroidery skills, work collectively, and manage their organization. We held an embroidery workshop – a positive and co-operative environment for group members to learn from each other. We also took the members on visits to other collectives involved in similar projects to see how they worked and were organized. Through these visits, the group members acquired a broader awareness of product design and organizational management. A group of about twenty women received a loan of 50,000 RMB from the H Mother fund to build an embroidery pavilion where women could embroider together, hold meetings, and participate in other collective activities. The pavilion also acts as a showcase for their work and provides outsiders with an introduction to Qiang and Zang styles. Through these activities the group members' communication, co-operation, knowledge, innovation, and self-confidence were enhanced.

3.3 Ecological Tourism

H township is located in a beautiful area and its residents follow a carefully preserved traditional lifestyle. It offers a welcome respite to urbanites who wish to escape the city, relax, and enjoy nature. Given the township's rich social, ecological, and cultural resources, we encouraged the original embroidery group members to consider running a guest house for visitors interested in ecotourism. Together with the group members we visited various scenic areas and eventually drew up an 'ecotourism assets map' showing H township's natural and cultural resources and community networks.

The women started the ecotourism project in January 2010. Taking 20,000 RMB from the H Mother fund they established an "H Mother" guest house where visitors could stay and experience the area's ecological resources with local guides. We introduced the group to the concept of the homestay (*minus* in Taiwan and *minshuku* in Japan) so they would appreciate the difference between mass tourism and ecotourism. We provided the women with information on the operation of a family guest house and its basic requirements and helped them to

access outside resources (such as plans for building ecological toilets). Finally, we promoted the guest houses on the radio.

Some group members, however, were reluctant to participate: they relied on us to arrange the reception activities and positioned themselves as serving staff for the visitors. They had not yet arrived at the understanding that they owned the project. After lengthy group discussions and private conversations we realized that their passivity was based on earlier events: we had played a prominent role in the previous embroidery project and the group members followed our lead. They were simply repeating this behaviour in the context of the ecotourism project.

According to the principles of PAR, a key step in encouraging active participation is to involve the participants in the decision-making process related to project development (Pretty, 1995). We therefore invited the women to design ecotourism reception activities. The women worked together on the arrangement of accommodations, organization of activities, and the design of tour routes. After making tentative plans they focused on the practical means of realizing their vision. Feedback from visitors helped them to refine their original design. Our hope was that the group members would acquire a sense of ownership towards the project, build up a culture of democratic decision-making, and develop their own capacities.

In addition to encouraging the women's positive involvement, we fostered their confidence and cultural identity. Once they had paying guests, the women discussed how to make their guest house more comfortable. With our assistance, the women decorated the rooms to reflect their Tibetan legacy. In the past, they believed that they should copy the predominant *Han* style – ‘modern’ and ‘civilized’. As they interacted with visitors they realized the attractions of their traditional culture. We worked together to incorporate traditional cultural elements into their daily routines, thus providing visitors with a deeper understanding of their heritage. For example, the women embroidered the curtains and bed sheets in the guest rooms, and they used traditional methods of bamboo weaving to make wastebaskets.

To sustain the development of the project we devoted a great deal of energy to creating a market. The first step was to identify potential customers and to transform their conception of tourism. Mass tourism focuses on sightseeing and consumption. In contrast, we were promoting ecotourism which focuses on traditional cultural heritage, environmentalism, fair trade, and rural-urban co-operation. We offered information sessions in urban communities in Chengdu city where we introduced our project site and explained the principles of ecotourism and rural-urban co-operation. We broadcast a documentary about H township, which showcased its crafts and produce, and explored other channels for marketing on the Internet and public radio.

When tourists came to H township, their experience was unlike a usual vacation. They had close interactions with the host families, were able to enjoy the natural environment, participate in traditional cultural activities, and visit farms. They were encouraged to join their hosts working the field, cooking meals, and making handicrafts. In the process the farmers had the opportunity to impart their traditional culture and wisdom. Activities were designed to encourage city dwellers to question the consequences of mainstream economic development and consumerism. During their stay the visitors learned to appreciate the beauties of nature and the simple life, and some grew disillusioned with mass tourism. They gained a greater awareness of social, cultural, and environmental issues.

3.4 Organic Farming and the Fair Trade Project

We also encouraged the rural and urban participants to work together on an organic farming and fair trade project. When tourists came to H township they found that the produce was grown according to traditional methods, without any fertilizer and pesticide. Given that the integrity of food is a subject of critical concern in urban China the purity of the produce in H township was highly appreciated. We realized that fair trade would be a good basis for a mutually beneficial relationship between farmers and urban consumers. Bypassing the middleman the farmers could sell their organic products directly to consumers who would acquire unadulterated food for a reasonable price.

The first step in the development of the organic farming project was to assess the agricultural resources. We asked the local farmers to teach us about the breeding and planting of species in H township and about local modes of production. We discovered that the farmers were a fund of indigenous knowledge and local wisdom. Detailed field notes were taken and converted into an 'agricultural assets map' of the village which helped us to discover more possibilities for organic farming.

We encouraged the villagers to protect their traditional ecological farming methods and engage in an organic farming project. About ten farmers who were interested in eco-farming were organized into groups that would take a traditional approach to breeding livestock and growing produce. The ecological vegetable group members grew heritage varieties of tomatoes, sweet corn, peppers, and soy beans. The poultry group decided that no chemical fodder would be used. We worked together with the farmers to draw up the production plans, and provided them with market information and customer feedback.

We have promoted H township's organic food since 2009. In order to encourage city dwellers' support we needed to raise awareness of green agricultural methods. We regularly organized rural-urban exchange activities such as food-tasting festivals and farmers' markets. Through these activities the urban consumers learned about ecological production and rural life, and the farmers gained a better understanding of their customers' concerns about diet and the use of chemicals. Through such interactions they forged a more trusting relationship. City dwellers began to visit H township in order to buy produce directly from the farmers; some asked to be provided with a delivery service for their orders.

After discussions with the farmers and consumers we came up with a plan to open a fair trade shop which would serve as a shopping, marketing, and educational centre. In September 2010 we opened a shop in Chengdu and invited the women from H township to introduce their embroidery and agricultural products, tell their life stories, and explain their traditional culture. The fair trade shop gave us a platform to showcase our ideas, connect producers with consumers, and generally promote the mutually beneficial relationship of the farmers and the consumers.

4.0 Conclusion

Since the 5.12 earthquake in Sichuan China in 2008, we have worked in the villages damaged by the earthquake. In the past five years the focus of our work has shifted from social service-providing and resource-linking to promoting the sustainable and integrated community development in disaster areas. In this context, the rural-urban alliance as a new model was proposed and tried out. In responding to the salient problems of the mainstream economic development following the disaster the social workers and local rural people worked together to rebuild a sustainable rural livelihood for economic recovery, to promote

mutually beneficial rural-urban relations, to conserve their culture, and to protect their environment.

Rural-urban alliance revolutionizes the traditional disaster-relief relations between the affected people and outside helpers. In traditional helping relations the disaster-affected people are identified as needy, problematic and deficient. The reconstruction mainly starts by diagnosing the problems and assessing the needs, and then provides resources to the people; however, it ignores the capacities of the local people, lowers their self-confidence, makes them highly dependent on external resources, and leads to unsustainable development. Thus, we propose a model of rural-urban alliance to change the negative and inequitable traditional helping relationships. Through the rural-urban alliance the relations between the disaster-affected rural people and the outside helpers are mutually reciprocal. Both of them have assets and capacities, and both of them have needs. For the urban people, the rural people can provide them with high quality agricultural products and environmental resources, and lead them to experience traditional culture and customs. In addition, rural life itself can be revived and offered as a service to urban dwellers. For the rural people, the urban populations are a potential market for certain types of rural production that can command a higher price. To reach these potential urban markets small businesses can be created, and generate sources of income with rural families providing agricultural products and service to their urban counterparts. Some of the family-to-family relationships in particular have been remarkably effective with urban families opening doors and providing key support to their rural counterparts.

Another dimension of disaster social work intervention is to build up the capacity of local people. Five years after the earthquake we found that the local community is changing. Most apparent was the emergence of a core group who were empowered in the process. They are both strongly motivated and committed to transforming their lives and participating in community development. The women's capacities for cooperation, communication, problem resolution, and self-confidence were developed in the process. Three cooperative groups — embroidery, eco-farming and ecotourism — were formed and well functioned. In the next stage, we will work together with the members to enlarge their groups, enhance the urban mobilization, and extend the rural-urban alliance to benefit more people in the rural and urban areas. All of the work in the both rural and urban areas must take into consideration safety issues under the post-disaster conditions. There were aftershock and other secondary disaster like landslides, mudslides and floods happened after the earthquake. Our works became unpredictable and difficult. However, with the mutual support and understanding of both the rural and urban participants we were pleased to see miraculous breakthroughs. In December 2012, upon obtaining the support from the local township government, we began to transform and renovate Shantou's Reconstruction Headquarters as a rural social work base which serves multiple functions: guesthouse, office, training centre, community centre and practicum base. Through action research it serves as the long-term site for us to explore the theory and practice model of rural and disaster social work in China.

In short, the movement of rural-urban alliance went beyond the conventional post-disaster rebuilding model. We learned that if we wanted to break the vicious cycle of 'disaster-reconstruction-disaster' we needed to abandon the mainstream economic development model and turn to 'green social work' which advocates land and environmental protection for rebuilding the sustainability of local community. With our five-year experience we have the confidence to say that we have developed a unique model for post-disaster community rebuilding in

China's context. Rural-urban alliance as a new model can be an alternative way of post-disaster reconstruction for long term sustainable development.

Our pace of work was not rapid; we faced a lot of difficulties, and we occasionally were disheartened. However, we strongly believe that if social workers can stay rooted in the community and walk together with the local people, this will bear the fruit of sustainable community development.

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