

## ROLE OF WOMEN IN DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

Over the recorded centuries of man's history, his capacity to reason has allowed for tremendous progress in his physical environment. And as such progress is made, man has had to adapt to ever evolving circumstances. Notwithstanding, the march of civilisation has not been smooth. Inherent in the progress made is the manifestation also of disasters which are:-

- a. As a natural consequence of the combination of the elements and
- b. As a direct activity by man and his various relationships with his environment.

While there is no hard and fast rule in man's capability to preempt and thus prevent natural disasters, man made disasters are manageable to the extent that such disasters have their origins in man's activity with his physical environment.

However, we ought not to take too narrow a view of disasters and lump them as Earthquakes and Hurricanes on the one hand and pollution on the other. There are several other types of disasters at a lower level of intensity and which are peculiar to certain geographical areas. In the Caribbean for instance while earthquakes and drought are not peculiar to it, Hurricanes and pollution are perennial problems, Regionally.

Sociologically: a disaster is an event located in some time and space that produces the conditions whereby the continuity of this structure and process of social units becomes problematic. Disaster agents may differ as to their cause, frequency, controllability, speed of onset, length of forewarning, duration, scope of impact, and destruction potential (Dynes 1975).

As mentioned before there are two trends to this concept of disaster, which itself seems to be changing over time. However, for Analysis of disaster situations it may be helpful to conceptualise the disaster experience as a process with differing phases.

From a national standpoint it would seem that adequate information is the key factor in disaster preparedness. In the Caribbean experience it is important that member states recognise and tabulate those disaster areas that are peculiar to them. From shared experiences they can disseminate information as regards the possibilities and treatment of these disasters. According to a recent United Nations report, (The Sociological Aspect of Disasters) "It is clear that vulnerability to disaster is the product of interaction between the ecosystem of which man is a part and the socio-economic arrangements which he uses to win survival and even prosperity, from the environment. An understanding of the dynamics of hazardous situations can therefore be obtained if we identify these factors existing in both the physical world and the social environment which lead to potentially disastrous situations"

To be prepared means among other things that a warning system or device is in place. This usually refers to the evacuation process in the light of disaster situations. The warning presupposes the threat to life and property and the impact it can have on the community or country threatened.

However, there are three distinct phases to a disaster experience and the first three above refer to the first stage. This has to do with the possibility and as a consequence, intended consequences of such a disaster experience. The second stage actually deals with the implementation of certain measures to be taken given a disaster experience. These measures relate to Assessment, Rescue and immediate action.

On the assumption that a disaster has occurred, say a hurricane experience in an Island State, then the state authorities concerned need to assess the damage done. Human lives in this instance become a priority and rescue/search missions necessarily follow. Coupled with this effort is the need for immediate relief to the victims as a consequence.

The third stage deals with the level of recovery that has been achieved from the immediate action taken. This in itself provides for a more long term effort at Rehabilitation.

The simple explanation given of the flow chart attached does not preclude technicalities in the treatment of this process. It is obvious that in every different phase of treating with a disaster experience, the

information to be disseminated, the actions need for corrective measures, the various problems one would encounter in each case and the people involved in the experience may differ. A better understanding of disaster situations require analysis of the issues, actions and the problems in each of these different phases. The inter-relationships of these different phases and activities require thorough examination and analysis.

It is generally held that an analysis of the social issues in emergencies begins with considerations of the fact that individuals act both singularly and as groups and that groups also act independently and in association with other groups. The social dynamic of an emergency is composed of a vast web of individual and group actions, from singular responses to international collaboration. These individual and group actions are influenced and guided by several variables, as for example past experience, values and ideas, opinions and tradition, custom, desires, wishes and resources.

But while it is worthwhile to examine general trends for information gathering and dissemination, we can do well to remember that vulnerability and risk of necessity vary from community to community, and can also vary within a community. (Dominica - Phillipines and Hurricane). For example two entities with the same risk say Hurricanes may have different vulnerability. Different hazards would carry with them different risks. The goal of disaster prevention and preparedness is to identify these risks and reduce people's vulnerability to those risks.

This brings to my mind in the light of this goal two central questions pertinent to the well being and safety of states.

- a. How can human settlements and activities be oriented towards zones where the risks are less great;
- b. How can better protection be provided for the human settlements at present situated in danger zones.

These may well be issues for the planners of the respective communities to address for the purpose of finding solutions. However, for the developing Caribbean nations whose level of Industrialisation is tied to the well known dependency syndrome, (Advanced technology) the environment and its protection finds a special place in regional efforts at marginalising the possibilities and impact of disaster experiences.

The developed northern Communities recognising the effects that toxic waste would have on their individual territories have embarked on a project of disposing such waste in the underdevelop south, of course at a price both financial and social. We are well aware of the harmful effects of these toxic waste materials on the health of the unfortunate citizens.

MANDAMATA DISEASE - JAPAN - where toxic waste was being deposited into a river from which riverian Japanese were drawing water for household and other purposes. The result was that at birth the children were deformed, particularly the cranium. The fish, died in the river and the vegetation on the river banks suffered too. The Company was brought to court, and was made to provide compensation to those that suffered. If such situations were allowed to continue one could well imagine the consequences.

As recent as August, 1989 the United Nations officer responsible for compiling a list of chemicals banned or restricted by Governments, indicated that the Caribbean ought to be more involved in the compilation of the lists and their distribution. This follows the signing of an agreement between the Government of West Germany and the Environmental Health Services of the Caribbean to assist this region in its efforts at addressing the issue of the disposal and banning of hazardous chemicals. This project aims to upgrade the facilities, institutional and operational capacities of the Caribbean Environmental Health Institute and covers the areas of water, sewerage, sanitary facilities, toxic chemicals and hazardous substances.

Lest we forget the need for industrialisation Caribbean States ought to take account of and project sound environmental practices. The several areas identified for guaranteeing such an approach:

- a. Institutional development at the National and Regional levels.
- b. Formulation of plans based on specifics such as
  - (1) Coastal protection
  - (2) Training and human resource development to ensure a cadre to man the programme in the Region and
- c. Public education to influence day to day behaviour of the population of the Caribbean.

Thus far in my discourse I have been dealing with some sociological aspects relating to the methodology of treatment of disaster experiences. I have attempted to outline the approaches that ought to be taken when dealing with these situations, as recent studies have shown. For the greater part these have been in general terms. However, at this point in time, I would like to be more country specific with the intention of seeking to apply the preparedness and methodology as used in Guyana as it relates to a consistent disaster experience, that of fires.

Guyana, like most Caribbean countries, use mainly wood products in their construction of homes, businesses etc. This is an obvious result when one recognises that one of the localised resources, particularly in Guyana, is lumber and its by products found in our Forests. Immediately this brings to mind, apart from other factors, the ever present possibility of fires obtaining. As a matter of fact, Guyana has a history of disastrous fires both to big business and to residential areas. While the former is income generating and can recoup its losses from Capital and Insurance, the occupants of the latter, if such residences are not insured suffer greatly. This is my particular area of concern.

The Guyana Government recognises this threat to the well being of its citizens. Consequently machinery has been put in place to offer some measure of relief to such victims of fires. There is a National Relief Committee responsible for providing relief measures which take various forms. Of course, the immediate need of the victims would be in the area of housing. Temporary arrangements are made to house such families in the short term until a more permanent solution is had in the long run.

Provision is also made for clothing and kitchen utensils whereby the family would be able to maintain some level of its former existence. Counselling to lessen the psychological effects of the trauma is also done as a part of the rehabilitation process. Night Shelters are also provided as a standard procedure. This is done both at a Governmental and private level.

However, of important to note is that the Government in fulfilling its obligation to the people of Guyana, has, as early as 1982, set up a Civil Defence Commission. This Commission is broad based and while it focuses on disaster experiences, also takes into account the territorial rights of Guyana.

Given the Global and Regional State of Economies, financing relief programmes becomes problematic. Nonetheless, I would like to propose that a National levy financing a contingent fund be set up in each country of the Caribbean community for the sole purpose of assisting in managing the treatment of disaster experiences. It could take the form of a yearly budgeted amount on the National Budget of these countries. Perhaps, the volume of the fund can depend upon the availability of funds, and more important the frequency and destruction levels of these disaster experiences. Private concerns as part of the Income Tax relief measures can also be made to contribute to this fund. The overriding factor is that we must recognise that the onus lies with respective Governments to set up their own mechanisms initially to deal with these situations. Of course we recognise the inputs of International Relief Agencies and the role they have been playing through their Central body the United Nations. However, we in the Caribbean need to, as mentioned before, put our own systems in place, given the range of our experiences with disasters peculiar to our Region.

As a forethought, we need also to project our minds into the future and look at the question of population growth. Fortunately, we in Guyana possess land space that we have not been able to occupy for various reasons. We have a very high ratio in terms of square miles as per population. There will be no problem for us in the immediate future. But what of the Island countries of the Caribbean?

Population growth in countries with limited land space pose serious problems. The steady growth of these populations force the citizens of these countries to marginal use of land. In the event of any disaster experience obviously more persons are exposed to risk. Caribbean countries are particularly vulnerable to this risk given the limited land space on these island territories. We need to seriously address this situation. Of importance to the Caribbean Region however, is the need for:

- a. Building codes and standards in light of our list of Disaster Experiences.
- b. Public Education as to the need for disaster awareness
- c. continuous monitoring and inspection of pre-empt disasters and their corresponding effects.
- d. Disaster insurance and land use management
- e. Risk mapping and
- f. Safety codes.

These measures if taken as policy, can tend, to mitigate the ever present spectre of disasters, both natural and man made.

Our most recent experience with Hurricane "Hugo" underlines the urgency with which Caribbean countries should implement the measures adumbrated from (a) to (f) above. Individual States need to have their building codes geared to satisfy by far, more permanent structures which can reasonably withstand the ravages of Hurricanes. This to my mind can minimise the cost factor in terms of reconstruction.

While safety codes are of necessity built into building codes themselves, safety measures embrace a wider spectrum in its conceptualisation. One can envisage "Hurricane Shelters" meaning Centres to which the community can retire on the eve of a hurricane. This certainly, if adhered to can restrict the loss of lives to a bare minimum at worst.

However, such measures will be ineffectual if there is no continuous system in place to continuously inform and educate the respective populations on disaster awareness. Radio programmes and information booklets, sponsored and prepared by member States can go a long way in continually reminding the Caribbean peoples of the existence of these threats to their well being and the attitude in terms of responses they are expected to produce at the time of such crises.

Risk mapping suggests both an individual and collective approach to outlining possible disaster experiences. It would entail an overview of risks in the Caribbean in general and country in specific, thus allowing for plans to deal with each situation at the National and the Community levels (Caricom Community)

Of the greatest importance is the need for continuous monitoring and inspection of these mechanisms that are in place to combat disaster experience. The Caribbean Communities need to be in a state of readiness at all times if we are to marginalise the impact of disaster experiences common to this area.

So far I have dealt with the question in broad terms, but it is obvious that the Role of Women in each of the proposals can be significant, this can be looked at in a number of ways.

Women are more than half of the population in any given territory in the Caribbean. It is logical that they therefore, can be meaningfully deployed in both the education process and direct Management of any planned programme to meet the needs of Society in disaster preparedness, both at the individual level and at the collective level. Women do also have the most organised groups, whether it be the Church, Political, Social, Income Generating, Professional or at the community level. My belief is that the time has come for a more fundamental role to be played by these organisations in helping to meet the needs of Society, in other words broadening their participation in issues that not only promotes their interest but their very existence.

In the Caribbean women's groups seem to concentrate and moreso since the introduction of the Decade, on promoting development, integration, equality and to some extent Peace. On ensuring that the focus bears positive results, be that as it may, can be regarded as satisfactory. But while we prepare ourselves for that involvement, that participation, and we do not also concentrate on matters of survival and existence, then we may find we have nothing to be involved in, may participate in, and natural disasters can rob us of that privilege as can be seen in the "Hughes" disaster.

I further contend that Women's Organisations must seek and find ways of enhancing programmes in Disaster Management within their organisations by:

- a. Organising educational programmes through the Media, Lecture Series, Television, Radio and School Programmes that have a component of drills, exercises and skills training (Carpentry, Electricians, plumbers).



- b. Begin to think and plan underground shelters with basic facilities. Sectionalised for adults, children and the aged.
- c. Preparation and construction of make-shift shelters and rest huts (Women can be trained to provide these).
- d. Management of food supplies and distribution, along with recognised Organisations (like the Red Cross etc.), also pre-packed food supplies (de-hydrated). Women who are food technologist can begin to put their talents to work, so that in times of need it can be tapped.
- e. Agitate for a levy which must be put aside by Government, from the contribution of the working populace (every employed member of society must be made to participate) since in a disaster situation all will benefit. It is known that women do have the ability to lobby successfully, and a levy of 1% or any such contribution can be used whether as Government Bonds, Debentures or other securities generating further income to cushion the needs of society in disaster situation.
- f. Women groups should also seriously address the question of training in first aid treatment and basic nursing skills. Many years ago this was the practice in the case of Guyana, but that programme needs to be resuscitated today and be introduced into the Region if not already part of a disaster Management Programme.
- g. Compiling of a Register/Directory of trained personnel in every Community - noting levels of skills and experiences both in the Country and outside who will be willing to offer their expertise in times when help is necessary and much needed.

In all the above with more than half the population trained and in a state of preparedness, the impact of the effects of disaster will surely be lessened. Alternatively, relief and assistance better managed and available all coming from the source of a ready reservoir of talents and preparedness convinced that despite the fact that outside help is necessary efforts by the people within the Community is always first available before other help arrives.

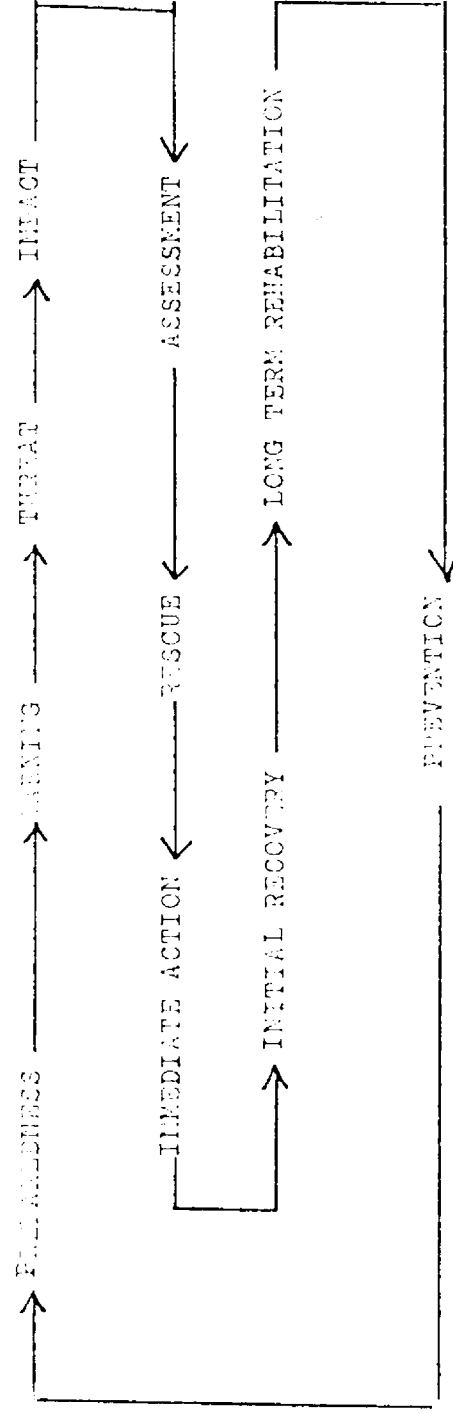
It is obvious that the Role of Women in each of these proposals can be of significant importance and value since the high risk levels in disaster circumstances bears heavily on them.

Education and involvement in the management of schemes aimed at improving the capabilities of women are always found to be gratifying but more so in the planning, execution and management of activities as they relate to the curbing and treatment of effects of disaster, man made or natura.

The rehabilitation and reconstruction of the society will always need the feminine touch. It is my view that the encouragement of young women into Organisations with an interest in addressing issues of a national or Regional character is important and forms part of any management strategy ensuring success and continuation of Programmes benefitting society of which Disaster Preparedness Management must form part.

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FLOW CHART



FOR ANALYSIS OF DISASTER SITUATIONS, IT MAY BE USEFUL TO CONCEPTUALISE THE DISASTER EXPERIENCE AS A PROCESS WITH DIFFERING PHASES, AS FOLLOWS.

REFERENCE

United Nations Publication 1982

"Disaster Preparedness a Social Prospective"