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Disasters and BIPOC Communities: The Imperativeness of Sustainability

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INTRODUCTIONS

• **Hadih** is an assistant professor of social work at WCU. He has extensive experience working with marginalized populations, including immigrant populations and families involved in the U.S. child welfare systems.

• **Frida** is an undergraduate social work student at WCU at the Philadelphia campus. She holds an associate degree in Behavioral Health & Human Services and has experience working with older adults.

• **Donna** is an undergraduate social work student at WCU at the Philadelphia. She holds an associate degree in Behavioral Health & Human Services and has experience working with individuals with drug and alcohol struggles.
PURPOSES OF THIS PRESENTATION

• To dissect the impacts of natural disasters and climate change on Blacks, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities

• To discuss the role of sustainability and its intersection with social work in limiting the impacts of climate change and natural disasters on BIPOC communities
SOME COMMON DISASTERS

- Earthquakes
- Volcanoes
- Landslides
- Famines & Droughts
- Hurricanes, Tornados, and Cyclones
- Extreme precipitation and flooding
- Extreme Temperature (Heat & Cold)
- Wildfires

In 2021 alone, there have been more 200 major disasters globally.

- From the western droughts/heatwaves and California flooding and wildfires in the United States to flash flooding in Chile and India and tropical cyclones in Mozambique.
TOO CLOSE TO HOME: REMNANTS OF HURRICANE IDA IN PHILADELPHIA
“NATURAL” DISASTERS

• The choice of the term “natural disasters” reflects a historical idea that these events were thought to be random, exceptional events, or acts of nature.

• Except for droughts, disasters are seen by humans as sudden, natural events.
  • The triggers of some disasters (earthquakes, tropical cyclones, or landslides) can be rapid.

• In most cases, however, disaster risk accumulation is slow and continuous over time, and triggered by incremental changes influenced by everyday, environmentally inappropriate decisions and actions by humans.
SOME HUMAN ACTIVITIES THAT WARM THE CLIMATE & ELEVATE NATURAL DISASTER RISKS

• Human activities that alter the climate system, and can lead to various forms of disasters include:
  • Burning of fossil fuels
  • Pollution
  • Mining
  • Deforestation
  • Urbanization
  • Shifts in vegetation patterns
EXAMPLES OF DIRECT RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CLIMATE WARMING & NATURAL DISASTERS

• More water vapor in the atmosphere has exacerbated extreme rainfall and flooding

• Warming oceans have affected the frequency and severity of the most intense tropical storms

• Climate change has increased extreme sea level events associated with some tropical cyclones

*World Meteorological Organization and UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (2021)*
‘CODE RED’: HUMANITY-DRIVEN GLOBAL WARMING

• The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released a damming, scary report on global climate warming in August 2021.

• The UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, called the report nothing less than "a code red for humanity."
‘Code Red’ for Humanity: A Snapshot
IMPACTS OF NATURAL DISASTERS: GLOBAL CONTEXT

• Deaths from natural disasters have largely declined since the 1970s, thanks to early warning systems and disaster management.

• Yet, natural disasters continue to claim thousands of human lives worldwide:
  • An average of 20,000 deaths globally between 2010 and 2019.

• Economic losses have increased sevenfold between 1970 and 2019:
  • An average of $49 million in the 1970s, to $383 million per day globally in the 2010s.

• Disasters affect those in poverty most heavily:
  • High death tolls tend to be centered in low-to-middle income countries without the
  • More than 91 per cent of disaster-related deaths occur in developing countries.
1. Although overall disaster-related fatalities in the United States have significantly declined, extreme heat alone kills more than 8,500 Americans yearly.
2. Billion-dollar economic impacts from disasters are on the rise.
CLIMATE CHANGE, NATURAL DISASTERS & BIPOC COMMUNITIES

• BIPOC communities continue to be the most impacted by climate change and natural disasters in the United States
  • For example, there are more than 8,500 extreme heat-related deaths in a typical year alone, with blacks the most impacted group
• Patnaik et al. (2020) outlined three ways that BIPOC communities disproportionately suffer from climate change and its attendant natural disasters:
  1. Poor air quality
  2. Ocean acidification
  3. Natural disasters
1. POOR AIR QUALITY

• More than one million African Americans live within a half-mile of natural gas facilities

• More than 6.7 million African Americans live in the 91 US counties with oil refineries.

• Overall, African Americans are 75% more likely than White people to live in “fence-line” communities:
  • areas near commercial facilities that produce noise, odor, traffic, or emissions that directly affect the population.
2. OCEAN ACIDIFICATION

• This occurs when the natural pH of ocean water is lowered due to increased CO2 levels

• Can affect natural plant and animal life

• Native American tribes living on the U.S. coasts, whose diet and economy primarily rely on seafood, are especially affected socioeconomically

• The Quinault tribe of Washington, owners of the Quinault Pride Seafood, Land, and Timber Enterprises, has bemoaned the increased number of dead fish washing ashore due to low oxygen levels in the rivers
3. NATURAL DISASTERS

• According to a 2018 study by Rice University and the University of Pittsburgh:
  • Dispersal of government aid in the aftermath of natural disasters fails to proportionally support minorities and low-income communities affected by natural disasters.
  • White families living in areas with about $100,000 in damage saw a wealth increase of about $26,000, compared to $19,000 for black families living in the same areas.
  • White families living in areas with about $10 billion in damages saw a wealth increase of nearly $126,000, compared to a wealth decrease of about $27,000 for black families.
  • BIPOC communities suffer from the consequences of tropical storms due to inadequate infrastructure and lack of proper insurance.
  • Also, minority populations are more likely to live near industrial facilities, leaving them at higher risk for chemical spills and toxic leaks resulting from tropical storms.
CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACTS BIPOC MORE

- NPR: As Rising Heat Bakes U.S. Cities, The Poor Often Feel It Most

Heat & Income in Baltimore
Source: NASA/U.S. Geological Survey, Census Bureau
BLEAK FUTURE: UNABATED GLOBAL WARMING WILL WORSEN THE PLIGHT OF BIPOC COMMUNITIES

In September of this year, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) issued a grim analysis of how racial minorities will further suffer disproportionately if the global temperature rises 3.6°F (the world has already warmed up about 1.8°F) compared with preindustrial levels:

- Native Americans and Alaska Natives will be 48 percent more likely than other groups to live in areas that will be inundated by flooding from sea-level rise.
- Latinos are 43 percent more likely to live in communities that will lose work hours because of intense heat.
- Black people will be 40 percent more likely than other groups to live in places where extreme temperatures will cause more deaths, suffering significantly higher mortality rates.

-Washington Post, Sept. 2, 2021
BLEAK FUTURE: UNABATED GLOBAL WARMING WILL WORSEN THE PLIGHT OF BIPOC COMMUNITIES

CONTINUED…

• Heat-related deaths due to global warming will skyrocket from the current 8,500 casualties to nearly 60,000 by 2050, with BIPOC populations in Arizona, Southern California and southwest Texas being hit the hardest (Atlantic Council’s Adrienne Arsht-Rockefeller Foundation Resilience Center)
SUSTAINABILITY

• The United Nations Brundtland Commission (1987) defined sustainability as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

• Sustainability is about ensuring that all people - today and into the future - can live in healthy communities and participate in productive local economies without sacrificing environmental integrity (WCU Office of Sustainability).
SOCIAL WORK & SUSTAINABILITY

• **Primary Mission of Social Work:** to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty (National Association of Social Workers, NASW, 2017).

• The mission of Social Work intersects with several of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
  • SDGs 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and 13 (Climate Action) are particularly important to this presentation
SDG 10: REDUCE INEQUALITY WITHIN AND AMONG COUNTRIES

10.2 By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status.

10.3 Ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities of outcome, including by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practices and promoting appropriate legislation, policies and action in this regard.

10.4 Adopt policies, especially fiscal, wage and social protection policies, and progressively achieve greater equality.

SDG 13: TAKE URGENT ACTION TO COMBAT CLIMATE CHANGE AND ITS IMPACTS

13.1 Strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters in all countries.

13.2 Integrate climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning.

13.3 Improve education, awareness-raising and human and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warning.
Social Work & SDGs 10 & 13
Social workers must:

- Advocate for equitable distribution of and access to governmental disaster reliefs for BIPOC communities.
- Fight against environmental racism, a form of systemic racism whereby BIPOC communities disproportionately suffer health hazards through policies and practices that force BIPOC to live in proximity to sources of toxic waste.
- Fight against environmental discrimination and disparities, forms of inequalities that are often exacerbated by disasters and climate crises.
Social workers must:

• Look at disasters as a wake-up call
• Educate students, colleagues, and the general population on the “Code Red” status of climate change
• Sensitize individuals and communities on climate change and natural disasters mitigation practices
• Organize BIPOC communities, especially, to adopt climate and environmentally friendly practices, including tree planting in the communities
• Advocate for equitable BIPOC representation on climate policy-making bodies and positions
• Pursue grassroots empowerment of BIPOC communities to challenge climate and environmentally unfriendly policies, laws, and practices

Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
IN CONCLUSION….

- Most “natural” disasters are a direct result of climate change
- Human activities are largely responsible for recent climate
- BIPOC communities are disproportionately impacted by natural disasters and climate change
- Everyone can play an integral role in attaining SDGs 10 and 13; social workers will always lead the charge
- The solutions to climate change must be human activities-driven

- Climate change mitigation efforts require an all-hands-on-deck approach with strong foundation
  - because the efforts will crumble if the foundation is not strong
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