"Popular" Social Work In Extremis: Two case studies on collective welfare responses to social crisis situations

Michael LAVALETTE

Liverpool Hope University,
Department of Social Work,
Care and Justice; Hope Park,
Liverpool L16 9JD,
tel. +44 (0)151 291 3000
E-mail: LAVALEM@hope.ac.uk

Vasilios IOAKIMIDIS

Durham University,
School of Applied Social Sciences,
Stockton Road DH1 3LE,
tel. 00441913341483
E-mail: vas.ioakimidis@dur.ac.uk

In the wake of an earthquake, a bombing, or a major storm, most people are altruistic, urgently engaged in caring for themselves and those around them, strangers and neighbours as well as friends and loved ones. The image of the selfish, panicky, or regressively savage human beings in times of disaster has little truth to it (Solnit 2009, p. 2).

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a welcome growth in the literature looking at social work responses to disaster and crisis situations. This literature looks at the range of skills and techniques that social workers can utilise in such situations and the expansion of the social work knowledge base as a consequence. Generally, this literature can be divided into two broad approaches.

First, there are those that look at the relevance and value of existing social work theories and skills in the face of such human tragedies. Cronin et al. (2007) suggest that social workers, and those whose work is informed by social work values (for them the key values are servicing people in need, affirming individuality and building on network relationships) are particularly suited to frontline disaster responses: our training and values make us the ideal 'disaster workers'. Bell (2008) looks at the response of social workers to Hurricane Katrina and suggests that case management approaches which focus on 'response co-ordination' are the key to successful intervention. A similar theme is taken up by Chou (2003) who looks at the moral and ethical dilemmas work in post-crisis situations created by analysing the aftermath of the 1999 Taiwan earthquake. Chou argues that there are identifiable phases of 'disaster management' and that, at

each stage, there will be gaps, problems and barriers that hinder intervention. But because social workers work systematically and from a strong value-base, they are particularly well placed to plan and implement 'ethically grounded' post-disaster service delivery. Whilst, in an important article, Pyles (2007) argues that too often 'disaster management' ignores the central role that community organising has to play in the regeneration of communities and the promotion of social development in the period of 'reconstruction'.

A second approach can be broadly located within a 'conflict resolution' framework. A number of articles (particularly focussed on the North of Ireland and Palestine) focus on the role of social work in helping survivors and victims of 'terrorism'. Ramon et al. (2006) encapsulate many of these themes and present an approach which they claim allows social work and social work education to deal with the impact of political violence on service users and workers (see also Campbell and Healey 1999, Heenan 2004). Yet, whilst the authors are clearly dealing with political situations, there is little discussion of politics, of history, of cause and orientation within these articles – indeed, being 'non-political' is asserted to be one of the main goals of social work intervention.

There is much of value in these articles and approaches as micro-level social work perspectives of disaster 'methods'. But what is common to both approaches is their lack of socio-economic context, the extent to which they shun political engagement and their failure to recognise that disaster situations (both 'natural' and those that are 'human-made') are as much social, political and economic events as they are human tragedies.

In contrast, we want to suggest that disasters and catastrophes are socio-political episodes that shine a light onto the nature, structure and order of societies. They pose immediate questions: Who has been killed and who has been saved? How can we meet survivors' immediate needs? Is the existing social structure a help or a hindrance to the relief programme? What are the immediate priorities for society (meeting human need? economic revival? maintenance of law and social order?)? The problem is that in the midst of such crises, 'solutions' can be posed from a variety of different organisations and interest groups.

Naomi Klein has recently suggested that such crises ('social shocks' as she terms them) are exploited by the powerful for political motives, to aid economic restructuring: "shocked societies often give up things they would otherwise fiercely protect." (2007a, p. 17). On her website she summarises this in the following way:

> At the most chaotic juncture in Iraq's civil war, a new law is unveiled that would allow Shell and BP to claim the country's vast oil reserves…. Immediately following September 11, the Bush Administration quietly out-sources the running of the "War on Terror" to Halliburton and Blackwater…. After a tsunami wipes out the coasts of Southeast Asia, the pristine beaches are auctioned off to tourist resorts.... New Orleans's residents, scattered from Hurricane Katrina, discover that their public housing, hospitals and schools will never be reopened… (Kleine 2007b).

In the *Shock Doctrine* (2007), Klein traces the violence committed against humanity by a combination of wars and neo-liberal globalisation. In particular, she looks at the ways in which a series of 'social shocks' – 'natural' disasters and political, military and economic crises – have been exploited by powerful global and corporate elites to restructure economies and produce:

huge transfers of public wealth to private hands, often accompanied by exploding debt, an ever-widening chasm between the dazzling rich and the disposable poor and an aggressive nationalism that justifies bottomless spending on security (2007, p. 14–15).

In essence, Klein is arguing that during episodes of 'social shock', corporate elites use the chaos and confusion to reorganise and restructure society to make it more susceptible to the demands of neo-liberalism. Countries that are desperate for any kind of aid find themselves without any leverage to negotiate the terms of the aid they get. Klein terms this process 'disaster capitalism'. As an example, in the aftermath of the Haitian earthquake, the conservative think-tank the Heritage Foundation suggested, in a document entitled "Amidst the Suffering, Crisis in Haiti Offers Opportunities to the US", that:

In addition to providing immediate humanitarian assistance, the US response to the tragic earthquake in Haiti offers opportunities to reshape Haiti's long-dysfunctional government and economy as well as to improve the public image of the United States in the region (Eaton 2010).

Whilst Gary Younge notes a recent UN study that considers the impact of 21 natural disasters on heavily indebted countries that concludes that rebuilding costs leave long-term financial burdens. The report suggests that:

Shocks on such a scale can lead to a vicious cycle of economic distress, more external borrowing, burdensome debt servicing and insufficient investment to mitigate future shocks (cited by Younge 2010).

The strength of Klein's argument is that she shows, in example after example, that the opening up of societies to 'free-markets', 'civil society' and neo-liberal forms of regulation, has been accompanied by brutality and coercion "inflicted on the collective body politic as well as countless individual bodies" (2007, p. 15), and the formation of new interdependent relationships between the state and capital.

Yet, despite its many strengths, her argument can seem overly conspiratorial – a criticism made by, amongst others, Joseph Stiglitz (2007) when he suggested that "there are no accidents in the world as seen by Naomi Klein".

In this respect, the 'shock doctrine' metaphor is too unidirectional. So despite the centrality of the events in Iraq to her argument, it is not simply the case that the war was prefigured on its potential to open up the country to the world market and neo-liberal economics. It's also not the case that a 'social shock' is necessary to bring in neoliberal regimes of regulation; neither Britain nor the US (or countries like India or Egypt) suffered 'social shock' in the sense outlined by Klein prior to their attachment to neo-liberalism.

It's also not the case that 'social shocks' always produce, or necessarily produce, neo-liberal outcomes. Solnit (2009), for example, suggests that 'social shocks', disasters and crises pose innumerable questions about the nature of society and its priorities; questions which can be answered in countless ways by local communities in the midst of such catastrophes. Thus she argues that during such: "moments of social upheaval … the shackles of conventional belief … [can] fall away and … [vast] possibilities open up." (2009, p. 9) She suggests that people suffering unimaginable misfortune in the midst of 'social shocks' often resort, not to savagery and brutal competition (an assumption which reflects a Hobbesian notion that people in such circumstances find themselves in an archaic 'state of nature') but to "an almost beatific selflessness, comforting

themselves in extremis by aiding others" (2009, p. 14). By way of a contrast, therefore, Solnit suggests that in the midst of disasters we get a glimpse of a 'paradise built in hell'. She argues that whilst:

> Disasters are … terrible, tragic, grievous … [and] not to be desired … [they] drag us into emergencies that require we act, and act altruistically, bravely, and with initiative in order to survive or save the neighbours. … The positive emotions that arise in those unpromising circumstances demonstrate that social ties and meaningful work are deeply desired, readily improvised, and intensely rewarding (Solnit 2009, p. 6–7).

What determines whether a society suffers post-disaster 'social shock' or a 'paradise built in hell'? There is no simple or simplistic answer. But the two case studies that we present here (and which are part of a broader project we are involved with) suggest that in this vortex politics matter. Where there are traditions of social movement activity, where there is a collective memory of 'alternative ways of living', where there is, what political sociologists call, a complex and known 'repertoire of contention and collective action' (Tarrow 1994, p. 6) then there is a greater possibility that these traditions of resistance can be utilised to resist social shock and to address the immediate needs of the community and, in the process, advocate for alternative solutions.

But whether disasters open up societies to 'social shock' or offer a vision of 'paradise built in hell' they also open up a debate over the nature of social work and the suitability of social work practices. As Michelle Herbert Boyd notes (in a study of social work responses to the Halifax explosion in 1917, in Canada)

> Crises force individuals and [social work] professionals to examine their role in the social order, and they can be a catalyst for effective community development, progressive social policy, and social change. Conversely, they can lead to conservatism, fear and the maintenance of the *status quo* (Boyd 2007, p. 5).

"Popular" Social Work

In this paper, we look at two examples where communities, faced with 'disaster situations', have responded by creating responses that we identify as forms of 'popular social work'. Our thesis is that in extreme circumstances (war, environmental disaster, severe economic crisis, etc.) there is an immediate requirement for a social work that can engage with communities and meet people's needs. Faced with these immediate needs, communities and social movements act to create an engaged popular social work and the examples that follow, we suggest, provide a glimpse (and sometimes it is no more than that) of what this 'popular social work' can look like: a social work that is flexible, open, reliable, non-stigmatising and non-conditional.

But posing our hypothesis in this way suggests an important question needs to be asked: What is social work? This is not a new question, of course, but answering it is deceptively simple. As Cree and Myers note: "An examination of social work's history demonstrates that social work has always been 'up for grabs'; its task and direction by no means self-evident" (2008, p. 1).

The majority of social work text books attempt to define social work by reference to the training undertaken by students (and their relationship to international definitions and national occupancy standards), the areas of employment social workers are employed within (children and family teams, adult teams, voluntary sector projects, etc.) and the qualifications and professional recognition obtained by practitioners. Such definitions refer to the (important) world

of state-directed social work. Within the academy debates rage over the differences between the methods, approaches and perspectives of professional practitioners – and whether social work is an essentially conservative, critical, transformative, therapeutic or radical profession (c.f. Fook 2002, Payne 2006, Cree and Myers 2008). Debates also focus on the impact on social work of neo-liberal social policy regimes (Jordan 2000, Ferguson 2008), and the consequences (for both workers and service users) of imposed changes to the working environment of frontline workers (Harris and White 2010). These debates are important and we do not want to devalue them in any way.

However, these approaches focus on debates within, and changes to, state directed social work and this raises a further important question: should the definition of social work be restricted to those activities carried out by 'qualified professionals' in this narrow range of employment outlets? Indeed, there is a bigger problem. Given the changes that have taken place to social work qualifications in Britain over the last 25 years (from CQSW to DipSW to BA Social Work) any such narrow definition would, in effect, mean that many of the training practices, placement opportunities and jobs carried out by CQSW trained staff would now not be deemed 'proper' social work given the present narrower definition of appropriate and regulated social work education and employment tasks.

If this is a problem within Britain, the difficulties of providing an acceptable definition of social work internationally grow exponentially. The International Federation of Social Work's definition of social work, which has been widely quoted and has garnered support from national associations and affiliates, doesn't simply define the profession as a narrow, state directed activity. Rather it argues that social work:

> promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people … (It) addresses barriers, inequalities and injustices that exist in society. It responds to crises and emergencies as well as everyday personal and social problems … Social work interventions range from primarily person-focused psychosocial processes to involvement in social policy, planning and development. …[Including] counselling, clinical social work, group work, social pedagogical work and family treatment and therapy … Interventions also include agency administration, community organisation and engaging in social and political action (IFSW 2000).

Despite the popularity of this definition of social work, it raises a number of questions, not least of which concerns the extent to which this matches, in any way, the work tasks of the majority of social workers in the statutory sector in Britain. But does the IFSW definition only apply to those who carry a 'recognised qualification' from a national regulatory body? Or could there be organisations, networks and individuals who engage in social work activities – even though they do not hold official accreditation?

We contend that 'popular social work' (PSW) is an important part of our history. PSW as a form of practice tends to be linked to broader social movement activity, and undertaken by a range of people (some with official training, some without) who are focused on producing, providing and developing services for their community within the context of unequal, oppressive and hierarchical societies.

Examples of such popular social work are sprinkled throughout the history of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, in numerous countries. In Britain it was present in the work of individuals like the Marxist feminist Sylvia Pankhurst, the socialist activist George Lansbury,

(the future Labour Prime Minister) Clem Attlee, (the Christian socialist, turned communist) Mary Hughes and (the socialist feminist) Emmeline Pethick. These people combined political campaigning (for women's rights, political representation for working class communities, trade unionism and against World War) with case-based advocacy work, representation of 'clients' to the Poor Law Guardians, provision of community cafes and meals for poor school children and fighting for housing and jobs in the face of poverty and mass unemployment (Lavalette 2006, Lavalette and Ferguson 2007, Pankhurst 1932/1987, Pedersen 2004).

Visions of popular social work can also be seen in the community and campaigning work of Jaynne Adams and Bertha Reynolds in the United States in the first half of the century (Reisch and Andrews 2002). It is present in aspects of the social action models within the Settlement Movement in Canada, and in the work of Mary Jenison, a founder member of the Canadian Association of Social Work, famed for her progressive work with children, youth and unemployed workers in Hamilton and who found herself on the Government 'red list' because of her views and activities (Jennissen and Lundy 2011). Or, in the work of Mentona Moser, the Swiss social work pioneer and leader of, and practitioner within, *Red Aid* in the 1930s (Hering 2003). "Popular social work" was also part of the US welfare rights movement of the 1960s when a number of social workers, like Bill Pastreich, Rhoda Linton, Richard Cloward and others from the Community Action Training Centre, played leading roles in the movement. These workers organised and campaigned alongside black women's groups against poverty, for welfare payments and for a range of political and social rights (Nadasen 2005).

The historical examples of PSW are not simply drawn from the "Anglo-American world". Paulo Freire (1998) has argued that much of the work of popular community educators and pedagogues in Latin America should be considered similarly as a form of "progressive social work", one that has at its core the desire to transform the world. And this would encapsulate the work of thousands of "liberation theology" priests in Latin America, for example, who, despite the violent opposition of the Vatican and the Latin American states, declared the doctrine of the "preferential option for the poor" that led to the development of various grassroots welfare projects which had the emancipation of the poor as their main objective (Gutierrez 1971).

In Britain, Jones has argued that the drive to "professionalise" social work was part of an attempt to inoculate the worker from those they worked with and to stop the possibility of "contamination". The concern was to stop middle class professionals identifying with their clients and locating the source of their difficulties in the structural inequities of society (Jones 1983, Ferguson 2008). But the drive to "professionalise" and to get access to state resources has been combined, we suggest, with an attempt to distance social work from its more "popular" forms.

And so this raises a bigger question: is it possible that there are "popular forms of social work" that exist outside (or even partially outside) the formal, regulated fields of practice?

To ask this question is to raise the possibility that "social work" is actually a range of activities and actions that different groups in the community can engage in. Some of these will be trained professionals carrying out statutory tasks ("official social work"), but what about those who work to provide, for example, a community café as a provider of cheap, high quality, nutritious food in a setting that brings isolated people together to share experiences and discuss what they (individually and collectively) need to do to improve their lives and their environment? Is this social work, even if the volunteers and workers are not professional social workers? In Preston,

in the north of England, there are two such community café projects. Both are located in the poorest parts of the city and both are run by small voluntary sector organisations. One has a qualified social worker as part of their team, but the other doesn't. Both have a large number of community volunteers who staff and help run the project. Both cafés have substantial "service user involvement" on their organising committees. Are either of these social work projects? Is one a social work project because a "professional" is involved and the other not?

During the Great Miners Strike in Britain in 1984/85 the mining communities organised soup and food kitchens, pantomimes at Christmas and parties and entertainment on occasional weekends. The intention was to keep up spirits and morale; to stop people feeling isolated; to help counter individual trauma, frustration and depression, and to meet basic needs (ensuring people had food and fuel for heating). Was this social work?

Recently, Whitmore et al. (2011) have offered an insightful look into a range of social welfare projects in Canada which position social work – sometimes led by professional social workers and sometimes not – at the forefront of a range of social justice campaigns, where meeting needs, demanding rights and acting for change are embedded within welfare activities. Are these social work projects?

One of the most widely used definitions of social work is Thompson's (2000, p. 13) assertion that "social work is what social workers do", our suggestion is that the activities described in this paper are forms of "popular social work" that are creative, vibrant, energetic and built upon a firm basis of community solidarity. If these types of activities are a form of popular social work – albeit one that are often ignored and written out of the history of the "profession" – is it not worth re-assessing and re-evaluating their worth for any insights they provide as to what good social work might look like?

Let's be clear, we are not suggesting that these examples offer a complete alternative, nor are we suggesting that social work education (its history, theory and knowledge base and training skills) and "official social work" are not important – or that "anyone can be a social worker". Neither do we propose that social work practitioners should surrender their employment rights in the name of a vaguely defined "voluntary" or "community based" project. This is not the "Big Society"! In contrast to the ideas of a top-down and social conservative "Big Society", the cases we look at share two common characteristics: they are genuinely grassroots and they are built upon democratic, inclusionary and non-stigmatising values.

Our suggestion, then, is that there are a range of projects across the globe that emerge from social movements, that embody new ways of thinking about community needs and that are tied to alternative visions of a different world. Social work can and should engage with these projects because, we believe, they can enrich our knowledge-base and our practice.

In what follows, we look at two case studies which look at models of "popular social work" in "extreme" circumstances.

The Haitian Earthquake

At the start of 2010, the international media started to report the horror of the aftermath of the Haitian earthquake that struck on 12 January. As the crisis unfolded, it was clear that the situation raised many of the issues that we wish to explore.

The disaster in Haiti was a natural one, the scale of the devastation almost beyond comprehension: over 230,000 people killed, two million homeless, somewhere in the region of 300,000 people injured, hundreds of thousands living in make-shift camps and the destruction of an already devastatingly poor highly indebted country (New Statesman 2010, Carroll et al. 2010). David Peppiatt (2010) from the Red Cross described Haiti as:

> The worst disaster zone I have ever seen. … Port-au-Prince [the Haitian capital] looks like it has been bombed to a pulp; the city is the epitome of Ground Zero.

Yet, although the earthquake was a "natural" event, it was one where the immediate effects, initial responses and the longer-term consequences of what happened were all affected by the social structure and the social relations of the society within which the disaster took place: the scale of the suffering was a reflection of the way in which Haitian society is organised and its relationship to the rest of the world. As Younge (2010) argues:

> The recent earthquake was an act of nature. But the magnitude of the devastation, the consequent human toll and the inability of the country to recover unaided are the product of its political and economic marginalisation.

In other words, the catastrophe was as much a socio-economic and political episode as a natural disaster. The earthquake did not hit all people "equally". The victims were overwhelmingly drawn from amongst the poorest sections of this very poor country. Of course, some wealthy people died and a number of UN workers were killed when the building they were working in collapsed; but, generally, less crammed, better built homes protect the wealthiest from the effects of earthquakes. Geographer Kenneth Hewitt (1997) has argued that the victims of earthquakes are overwhelmingly drawn from amongst the poor, he termed them not earthquakes but "classquakes".

The Haitian capital Port-au-Prince was grossly overcrowded. Sixty per cent of the housing was sub-standard. It had the infrastructure for a city of somewhere between 300,000-400,000 people – but 3 million lived there. This "excess population" was living in badly built shanty towns, like Cité Soleil which housed approximately 300,000 people. These were migrants from the rural areas who had been forced to leave their land and come to the city to try and find work. They came in increasing numbers from the mid-1980s onwards because the Structural Adjustment Programme that Haiti was forced to go through opened the country up for cheap US agricultural products to flood the local market and undercut Haitian farmers and peasants. In turn, the migrants looked for work in the Export Processing Zones (EPZs) that the Government set up, with US backing, to provide tax free havens for US multi-nationals (Gonzalez 2010a).

The result is that, prior to the earthquake, over half the population lived on less than $1 a day and the price of staples, such as rice, beans, water, cooking oil and gas had risen sharply, to the point that many Haitians were struggling to eat. (Gonzalez 2010b) This is a country: "that spent more in 2008 servicing its debt than it did on health, education and the environment combined" (Yong 2010). This is the context within which the earthquake struck.

After the disaster, what the people of Haiti needed was food, water and shelter. What they got was lots of US troops – few with any expertise in disaster relief. As John Pilger (2010) noted in the days after the quake:

The airport in the capital, Port-au-Prince, is now a US military base and relief flights have been re-routed to the Dominican Republic. … Critically injured Haitians waited unaided as 800 US residents in Haiti were fed, watered and evacuated. Six days passed before the US air force dropped bottled water to people ravaged by thirst and dehydration.

The relief effort was also directed at the wealthier areas of Haiti (Kimber 2010). On the same island, in the Dominican Republic, as Haitians fought for their lives, wealthy tourists – drawn from the American and Caribbean elites – bathed on the beaches, swam in the sea and lived their lives untouched in luxury hotels. In the aftermath of the quake, there were several reports that drew a sharp contrast between the starving, thirsty and homeless masses and the conditions at the US controlled airport and in the UN compounds where there was beer, food, water, blankets, internet access, generators and other aid relief from around the world (Kimber 2010).

Haiti is an hour's flight away from Florida, yet the recovery operation was painfully slow. Aid was flown in from Cuba and Venezuela, only to be turned away by US forces due to geo-political considerations (Gonzalez 2010b). Two months after the disaster only 40 percent of the 1.3 million in need had received tents, tarpaulin or shelter tool kits, yet the economic zones were back up and running – their expansion likely under the rubric of "reconstruction" (Carroll 2010).

The main concern of the Government, UN and US troops was the "restoration of order" and the prevention of "looting". But as Solnit (2010) argued:

After years of interviewing survivors of disasters, and reading first hand accounts and sociological studies from such disasters as the London Blitz and the Mexico City earthquake of 1985, I don't believe in looting. The great majority of what happens you could call emergency requisitioning. Someone, who could be you, someone in desperate circumstances, takes necessary supplies to sustain human life in the absence of any alternative. Not only would I not call that looting, I wouldn't even call that theft.

In other words, meeting immediate human need in times of crisis often requires breaching the "normal" rules, laws and codes of conduct in order to save lives – to challenge the dominant laws of property, for example, in order to feed and shelter a desperate populace.

But the Haiti case also points to tensions that develop within "relief" plans and the emergence of alternative forms of organising to meet community needs. Peppiatt (2010) argued that "through the death and destruction shines the sheer strength and resilience of the courageous Haitian people … even in the middle of a disaster, communities still have the ability to start rebuilding their lives". In the weeks that followed the disaster there were numerous appeals for aid that were organised via the major relief agencies. However, within Haiti there was growing anger that aid was being directed to large NGO's who had also been involved in the prior privatisation of welfare and the local state in the country. Some seven months after the disaster – despite billions of dollars being pledged in aid to the 23 biggest charities operating in Haiti – an ABS News report claimed that only two per cent of the monies had been released and just one per cent had been spent on operations (Adams 210). In response, the Haitian trade union organisation, in conjunction with its Latin American sister organisations, started to argue amongst its global affiliates that all aid should be diverted through trade union organisations. On the ground both trade union and community organisations started to organise the relief process in opposition to that provided by the US and UN troops and the global NGOs – popular forms of social work and self-organisation started to emerge (TUC 2010a & b, ICTU 2010).

Interestingly, however, one international project seemed to gain better results than others: the J/P Haiti Relief Organisation camp for the displaced. This project received considerable publicity because it was initiated by Hollywood celebrity Sean Penn – who left his home in the US to go to Haiti and work the organisation's tent city.

> With a fraction of the money of mainstream relief organisations and almost no experience of the aid game … [Penn] created what is widely regarded as the most vibrant and by some distance the best-run humanitarian project in Haiti (Adams 2010).

Adams reported that in Camp Penn there were more schools, hospitals, latrines and water stations than in any of the other 1,300 tent cities. It is, he suggested: "tidier … safer …and better designed than any other … [with] a real sense of community" (2010). And at its heart are two key principles. First, that volunteers should live in the camps where they work.

> NGOs pay thousands of dollars a month to billet staff in air-conditioned houses (the cost of leasing a home with a pool in Port-au-Prince has doubled since the quake), the Hollywood A-lister and his volunteers sleep in identical tents [within the camp] (Adams 2010).

Second, that money raised should go directly to the relief effort. J/P Haiti Relief only employed four people (none paid directly out of relief funds). The vast majority of the work was done by volunteers – the majority of whom came for a two week "tour of duty".

Standing behind these principles is a relatively simple set of values:

> [It] isn't just about spending money wisely. It also reflects a desire, surprisingly rare in the aid industry, to be seen as something approaching an equal by [those in the camps] … Traditional agencies might parachute into disaster zones with aid deliveries, and then vanish for days. Penn strongly believes that he can only help a community if he lives in it and understands what makes it tick (Adams 2010).

Adams's article focuses on Penn "the Hollywood A-lister" but the involvement of local trade union and community organisations and their activists in meeting local community needs chimes with themes present in other popular projects in other parts of the world.

Samidoun: PSW In Lebanon during the 2006 War

Between 12 July and 14 August 2006, Israel launched a massive assault on Lebanon. The effect on the Lebanese people was catastrophic. During the war: "At least 1,140 civilians – 30 percent of them children under 12 – [were] killed" (*The Daily Star* 2006). According to Human Rights Watch (2007) Israel showed "reckless indifference" to the fate of civilians during their attacks.

There were near constant air and sea assaults on Beirut, Tripoli, Tyre, Qana, Srifa and Baalbeck. Roads, bridges and factories were targeted alongside civilian areas, whilst the oil refinery at Jiyyeh was bombed causing massive environmental damage along 150 kilometres of the Lebanese coast. As a consequence, refugees from across Lebanon abandoned their homes and flooded into central Beirut.

The refugees' requirements were immediate and substantial – food, accommodation and medical support had to be provided and a range of social, welfare and psychological needs had to be met. But the traditional suppliers of welfare in Beirut, the vast number of civil society organisations in the voluntary sector and the more limited state sector, both removed their staff and closed down under the air-assault.

Into this gap stepped a new, vibrant and democratic organisation – *Samidoun* (an Arabic word meaning "collective resilience") – which became the main provider of basic needs for a large section of the refugee population in the city.

In January 2009, we arrived in Beirut and conducted a series of interviews with the *Samidoun* activists. Over 10 very intense days, we spoke to 15 key activists who were involved in every aspect of Samidoun's activities. Each recorded interview lasted for approximately 90 minutes. In addition, the activists provided us with written material and photographs relating to their activities during the war.[1]

In June 2006, when Israel launched an attack on Gaza, pro-Palestinian activists in Lebanon organised a sit-in protest at the Beirut seafront. As they gathered, they received news of Israel's attack on Lebanon. Some left immediately to go back to their families, others left to join the resistance fighters in the south of the country, but the majority stayed to debate what they should do. This was the starting point of a movement that grew from a handful of activists to a grass-roots organisation with over a thousand volunteers in a matter of days.

According to one of our interviewees (*G*), the roots of *Samidoun* can be traced to four sources. First, he told us:

> It harked back to older traditions of solidarity in Lebanon that were apparent in the 1970s. There were strong activist and left currents in Lebanon … and strong traditions and established networks that could provide support and direction … when Lebanon was going through one of its recurrent periods of crisis or war.

In other words, establishing such a solidarity network was part of the Lebanese left's historic "repertoire of contention".

Second, there was the creation of a new left that was developing in Lebanon out of the Global Justice Movement. As *B* relates:

> In Lebanon the protests at Seattle [In December 1999] and the creation of the World Social Forums were very important. They helped open a space for debate … We had been so divided and so marginalised for such a long time – Seattle and the Forums were the inspiration for a new generation.

Third, there was the impact of the conflicts in the Middle Eastern region. Here *L* outlines the importance of the Palestinian question.

> I started working in one of the Palestinian refugee camps in 2002 – as a worker with an NGO. The Palestinian issue has always been central to Lebanese politics and solidarity with the Palestinians a central concern for anyone who considers themselves as either an Arab nationalist or a leftist.

Finally, the large number of NGOs operating in the Beirut area provided a reservoir of young activists with relevant social welfare and social work skills. There are an estimated 4,000 registered NGOs in Lebanon (close to one for every ten citizens), with half operating in the greater Beirut area. They vary in size, links with the Lebanese state and their links with international co-partners or parent organisations. The NGOs are contradictory institutions. The larger, international NGOs have often been used as the "soft face" of welfare privatisation in much of the developing world under the suggestion that civil society (i.e., non-state) organisations are more efficient and more democratic than state providers of services. But the NGO sector also includes smaller, more

---

[1]   When drawing on interview material we use the interviewees initial only to protect their anonymity.

radical organisations (Lavalette and Ferguson 2007) and working in NGO social welfare work in a society like Lebanon requires an engagement with significant political questions, as *G* suggests:

> You cannot be a social worker in Lebanon unless you are an activist. Every issue is political. How do you talk to … young people about sexuality, without talking about politics? These are political issues which link into campaigning activities … The international NGOs want to de-politicise these things, but it's not possible.

The first task *Samidoun* faced was finding somewhere to operate from. Many of the activists were involved in Gay, Lesbian and Transgender politics and the Helem LGBT centre became the relief coordination centre for the organisation.

With its base established, activists had to set up some basic working rules. As *G* told us:

> Our aim was to get working. We didn't want to spend hours debating what to do … But at the same time we wanted everyone to feel that they had ownership over the organisation. So we decided we should strive for a flat organisation, one that was de-centralised and without any hierarchy. We wanted people to be able to take initiatives and get on with the job at hand. … But this only works if there is complete democratic involvement. So we had an assembly every night – once all the work of the day had been done – when we would reflect on our day's work and activities, discuss our needs and plan our activities for the following day.

Finally, the intention was to establish a popular organisation that focused on meeting the basic material needs of the victims of the assault. Such a grand plan required people to volunteer and get involved. They managed to persuade Lebanese television to put out a call for volunteers. By the end of the 33rd day of war, just over 1,000 people had volunteered and been active within the *Samidoun* network.

In the first couple of days of the war, the activists had organised themselves and found a base to work from, but there was still confusion over what was to be done. At the assembly on the evening of the third day of war, the activists started to grapple with the scale of the issues they had to address. The most pressing issue was the provision of appropriate shelter.

F and *T* were tasked with organising this. Historically, the Lebanese state had allowed people access to school buildings when they fled to Beirut, this time the schools had been locked and the refugees kept out. T and F told us what they decided to do:

F: We went to the schools. There were people outside but the schools were locked.

T: So we had no real choice, we decided we had to open the schools.

F: So Tarek and I decided we would kick down the school doors and open the schools.

T: I was nervous … but there were all these people there. There were kids with no water; families were sleeping in the streets. These people had travelled for 5 or 6 hours to escape the bombing. So what could we do? We had no choice. We broke in, opened up the schools and provided shelter. After we had done the first school, the rest were easy. I'm glad we did this; it was the right thing to do.

F: After the first one we just went from school to school. We opened 10 schools that first day – each time we had to break in. The next day the Government opened the schools officially, because we told them we would break-in if necessary.

Eventually *Samidoun* was covering 30 schools with over 10.000 refugees in them at any one point.

But as they realised at that evening's assembly, opening the schools raised new "demands": people had to be fed and watered, it was essential that families had something to sleep on so mattresses and blankets were required, soap and shampoo were needed to maintain hygiene standards, cleaning equipment was necessary so the schools could be kept clean, some of the refugees had injuries and some required prescription medicines, so there was a need for some medical support. Thus the assembly decided that the only way for the organisation to function appropriately was by specialising. They voted to divide themselves into specialised sections. Over the next few days the number of sections grew until there were 15 operating out of the Helem centre.

After the first few days, a basic routine was established. However, the Assessment section soon started to report that the children in the schools were getting bored, with little to do, and that there was concern that some of the children had been traumatised by the horrors that they had witnessed. The psycho-social section developed its work to address these issues.

MI is a social worker and was working in the voluntary sector before the war. She played a leading role within the psycho-social section along with *O* and *A*. *MI* told us about their initial concerns:

> We thought we should try to focus on issues of trauma amongst the displaced. We were particularly worried about the children and the sights they had seen. So we got volunteers who were social workers, psychologists, teachers and put together a programme to try and offer some form of psycho-social support.

O explained some of their thinking:

> We tried to offer a space for individual sessions, if people wanted to come and talk to us. We thought they would perhaps want to come and talk about what they had seen. But we also wanted to address the trauma in different ways. One of our members (*M*) was a clown and he moved from shelter to shelter. The kids loved it and he got lots of coverage in the news. It was strange to see a clown in the middle of bombed out buildings! *A* was a traditional story teller and he used to put sessions on telling classic Lebanese stories. Then we had art classes and other organised activities for the children.

Originally the activists thought they were providing a service for the children but they were surprised to find that many of the adults started coming to the events. In the conversations that took place and in some one-to-one sessions it was clear that the adults had been traumatised by their experiences and this had been compounded by anxieties over what was happening to their children.

The team used a variety of broadly social pedagogical approaches to engage with the refugees, to create the space for them to think and talk about what had happened to them; to express their fears and anxieties in a collective and non-threatening way and for the refugees to start to connect with each other and come to some form of collective understanding as to what had happened to them. Art and drama, singing and story-telling, juggling and work with clowns, football and other games were all used as a means of bringing the refugees together and allowing them individually and collectively to express themselves.

Forged in the midst of war, *Samidoun* stands out as a concrete example of a popular social work experiment that was democratic, non-hierarchical and focused on meeting human need at a time of crisis. It was a consciously political intervention that linked resistance, political struggle and social provision. It was able to organise 1000 volunteers and support over 10.000

refugees. The initial needs of the refugee population were material needs. They had to establish safe and secure centres (and had to challenge the Lebanese state's priorities whilst doing so), they had to feed the population and ensure they had water for drinking and washing. But they also realised that this was not enough. In the midst of horror people need to feel part of a collective, to experience solidarity and to forge relationships which confirm their humanity.

PSW in extremis

These two case studies form part of a larger project that looks at a range of PSW responses to crises – war, occupation, forced migration, earthquakes, Tsunami – that open up vital questions for those involved in social work internationally. There are other examples.

The youth and disability programmes in the refugee camps in Nablus and Jenin in the Palestinian West Bank, for example, are run by community activists who provide a range of resources to deal with the physical and emotional needs of traumatised people in the most difficult circumstances. Here the activists, who come from the camps and are explicit about their shared histories and because they have a complex understanding of the socio-political causes of the traumas faced by camp inhabitants provide rounded, non-stigmatising services which have developed organically (Jones and Lavalette 2011).

In Colombia, social workers and activists together face constant threats from the state and from organised gangs in their daily work with the internally dispossessed migrants (the *despalzados*) who leave the rural hinterlands and scratch out meagre livings in the city centres. Intervention based around principles of "conscientisation" have built programmes of rights advocacy, of democratic engagement and mutual respect with a focus on understanding the structural causes of social problems (Hinestroza and Ioakimidis 2011).

At the same time, much asylum and refugee work across Europe is community orientated, rights based work, that brings together community activists and a range of unqualified "helpers" (often from a range of political and religious organisations) to provide support, help and a campaigning network as part of the struggle for refugee rights (Mynott 2005, Ferguson and Barclay 2002, Teloni 2011).

We do not underestimate the difficulties those involved in PSW face (difficulties associated with human and financial resources, personal and collective danger, the responses of the powerful, etc.) but we believe they offer us a vision of an alternative – and provide lessons that would be valuable to social work generally.

These examples indicate that in the face of crises it is possible (though, of course, not inevitable) to establish projects that are organic, creative, politically informed and trusted by "service users"; projects that are community oriented and informed by collective values and a local knowledge base. Projects where there is no artificial distance between workers and service users and where full engagement between workers and service users is the norm. These examples also suggest that social work is not only what social workers do but sometimes it is what ordinary people demand, develop and fight for (in terms of theory) as well as how they do it (in terms of methods). We therefore contend that these popular social work responses "in extremis" offer valuable experiences and lessons which can enrich mainstream "official" social work theory and practice.

References

Adams, G. 2010. 'Hollywood star shows how aid can help Haiti', *The Independent.* Available from: <www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/hollywood-star-how-aid-can-help-Haiti-2023810.html> [11 July 2010].

Bell, A. 2008. 'Case Management with Displaced Survivors of Hurricane Katrina A Case Study of One Host Community', *Journal of Social Service Research,* 42 (3): 15–27.

Campbell, J. and Healey, A. 1999. 'Whatever you say, say something: the education, training and practice of mental health social workers in Northern Ireland', *Social Work Education*, 18 (4): 389–400.

Carroll, R. 2010. 'Quake-torn Haiti hit by floods, *The Guardian.* Available from: <www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/mar/01/quake-haiti-floods/print> [1 March 2010].

Carroll, R., Addley, E. and Meikle, J. 2010. 'Haiti homeless reach 2 million', *The Guardian.* Available from: <www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/jan/21/haiti-homeless-reach-2-million>. [21 January 2010].

Chou, Y. C. 2003. 'Social Workers Involvement in Taiwan's 1999 Earthquake Disaster Aid: Implications for Social Work Education', *Social Work & Society,* 1 (1): 14–36. Available from: <https://socwork.net/sws/article/view/251/426>.

Cronin, M. S., Ryan, D. M. and Brier, D. 2007. 'Support for staff working in disaster situations: A social work perspective, *International Social Work*, 50: 370–382.

Daily Star 2006. *Timeline on War The Daily Star (Beirut),* Daily Star. Available from: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/July_War06.asp>.

Eaton, G. 2010. 'Saving Haiti from disaster capitalism', *New Statesman.* Available from: <http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/the-staggers/2010/01/economic-shock-haiti-disaster>. [17 Janurary 2010].

Ferguson, I. and Barclay, A. 2002. *Seeking Peace of Mind: The mental health of asylum seekers in Glasgow*, Stirling, University of Stirling.

Fook, J. 2002. *Social Work: Critical Theory and Practice,* London, Sage.

Freire, P. 1988. 'A critical understanding of social work', Paper prented at the *Social Workers World Conference*, Stockholm, Sweden.

Gonzalez, M. 2010a. 'Building a new Haiti', *The Guardian.* Available from: <www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/Feb/04/haiti-rebuilding-funds-un/print> [4 February 2010].

Gonzalez, M 2010b, 'Haiti – the making of a catastrophe', *Socialist Review*. Available from: <www.socialistreview.org.uk/344/haiti-making-catastrophe> [February 2010].

Gutierrez, G. 1971. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, Orbis, New York.

Heenan, D. 2004. 'Learning Lessons from the Past or Re-Visiting Old Mistakes: Social Work and Community Development in Northern Ireland', *British Journal of Social Work*, 34 (6): 793–809.

Herbert-Boyd, M. 2007. *Enriched by Catastrophe: social work and social conflict after the Halifax explosion,* Nova Scotia, Fernwood publishing.

Hering, S. 2003. 'A soldier of the Third International: the social activities of the Swiss communist Mentona Moser' in *History of Socialk Work in Europe (1900–1960),* eds. S Hering and B Waaldijk, Opladen, Leske und Budrich.

Hewitt, K. 1997. *Regions of Risk: A geographical introduction to Disasters*, Harlow, Longman.

Hinestroza, C. and Ioakimidis, V. 2011. 'In search of emancipatory social work practice in contemporary Colombia: working with the despalzados in Bogat' in *Socialo Work In Extremis: Lessons for social work internationally,* eds. M Lavalette and V Ioakimidis, Bristol, The Policy Press.

Human Rights Watch 2007. *Why They Died: Civilian Casualties in Lebanon during the 2006 War,* Vol. 19, No. 5.

IFSW. The definition of Social Work, Available from: <www.ifsw.org/f38000138.html>. [February 2010].

ITUC 2010. 'Haiti – Trade Uniuon Assistance Arrives', Available from: <www.ituc-csi.org/haiti-trade-union-assistance.html> [February 2010].

Jones, C. and Lavalette, M. 2011. ''Popular Social Work' in the Palestinian West Bank: dispatches from the frontline' in Social Work in Extremis: Lessons for social work internationally, eds. M Lavalette and V. Ioakimidis, Bristol, The Policy Press.

Kimber, C. 2010. 'Hell in Haiti as aid turns to occupation', *Socialist Worker,* vol. 13, no. 1. Available from: https://socialistworker.co.uk/art/19734/Hell+in+Haiti+as+aid+turns+to+occupation> [26 January 2010].

Klein, N. 2007. *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism,* London, Allen Lane.

Lavalette, M and Ferguson, I (eds.) 2007, *International Social Work and The Radical Tradition,* Venture Press, Birmingham

Lavalette, M. 2006. *George Lansbury and the Rebel Councillors of Poplar,* London, Bookmarks.

Myers, S. and Cree, V. 2008. *Social Work: Making a difference,* Bristol, The Policy Press.

New Statesman 2010. 'Haiti death toll rises to 230,000'. Available from: <http://www.newstatesman.com/2010/02/haiti-thought-injured-season>.[10 February 2010].

Pankhurst, E. S. 1932/1987. *The Home Front*, London, The Cresset Library.

Payne, M. 2005. *Modern Social Work Theory* (3rd ed), Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.

Pedersen, S. 2004. *Eleanor Rathbone and the Politics of Conscience,* London, Yale University Press.

Peppiatt, D. 2010. 'Communities will make Haiti strong' *The Guardian.* Available from: <www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/Feb/21/haiti-displaced-social-networks/print>. [21 February 2010].

Pilger, J. 2010. 'The Kidnapping of Haiti', *New Statesman.* Available from: <http://www.newstatesman.com/international-politics/2010/02/haiti-pilger-obama-venezuela>. [28 January 2010].

Pyles, L. 2007. 'Community organizing for post-disaster social development: Locating social work', *International Social Work*, 50: 321–333.

Ramon, S., Campbell, J., Lindsay, J., McCrystal, P. and Baidoun, N. 2006. 'The Impact of Political Conflict on Social Work: Experiences from Northern Ireland, Israel and Palestine', *British Journal of Social Work*, 36 (3): 435–450.

Solnit, R. 2009. *A Paradise Built in Hell*, Viking, New York.

Solnit, R. 2010. 'Covering Haiti: When the media is the disaster', *Guernica: a magazine of art and politics.* Avialable from: <www.guernicamag.com/blog/1514/when_the_media_is_the/>. [21 Jenuary 2010].

Stiglitz, J. 2007. 'Bleakonomics', *New York Times.* Available from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/30/books/review/Stiglitz-t.html?_r=0> [30 September 2007].

Tarrow, S. 1994. *Power in Movement*, New York, CUP.

Teloni, D. 2011. 'Grasroots community socialo work with the 'unwanted': the case of Kinisi and the rights of refugees and migrants in Patras, Greece' in *Social Work In Extremis: Lessons for social work internationally,* (eds.) M. Lavalette and V. Ioakimidis, Bristol. The Policy Press.

Thompson, N. 2000. *Understanding Social Work: Preparing for Practice,* Basingstoke, Macmillan.

TUC 2010a. *Tuc Aid for Haiti Earthquake Appeal.* Avialable from: <https://www.tuc.org.uk/international-issues/tuc-aid/haiti-appeal/tuc-aid-haiti-earthquake-appeal>. [21 January 2010].

TUC 2010b. *ITUC interview with Haiti's Trade Union leader Loulou Cherry.* Available from: <www.tuc.org.uk/internetional/tuc-17532-fo.cfm>.

Whitmore, E., Watson, M. G. and Calhoun, A. (eds.) 2011. *Activism that Works,* Halifax, NS, Fernwood Publishing.

Younge, G. 2010. 'The West owes Haiti a bailout. And it would be a hand-back, not a handout', *The Guardian.* Available from: <www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/jan/31/west-haiti-bailout-reimbursed-brutality/print> [31 January 2010].