Building Community through a Hazard: Reforming Relationships between Communities and Disaster Management Agencies

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Background

Federal agencies have noted the increase in natural disasters related to climate change, particularly wildfires, hurricanes, and flooding (FEMA, 2021). Recent work shows that continual and repeated disruption caused by natural hazards disproportionately harms marginalized communities. A research team from the Coastal Resilience Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill organized focus groups and administered surveys to community members, local government officials, and academics. The purpose of the study was to determine how respondents addressed systemic inequalities, suggest equitable support on disaster mitigation for marginalized populations by building relationships and trust, and recommend policy changes to improve disaster recovery.

Methods

The team deployed a participatory action research (PAR) design that depended on the voices of respondents who support marginalized populations subjected to natural hazards. In this study, PAR allowed for the re-evaluation of terms (e.g., solutions) and provided a space for respondents to name instances of injustice around hazards and link them to oppression and racism. To start, the research team facilitated discussions with three advisory groups, totaling nine focus groups. We then analyzed the focus group data, identifying overarching patterns and themes. These findings were used to generate an online survey that was distributed to 179 non-governmental agencies (NGOs) and 140 governmental agencies nationwide.

Data Collection

Focus Groups

- January - March 2022
- 9 focus groups
- Insight was gathered from 25 experts across the nation.
  - 10 community experts
  - 8 government officials
  - 7 academics
- 10 FEMA regions represented

Survey

- March 2022
- 83 responses from NGO members and local government officials
- Representation from 50 states, one district, two U.S. territories and 10 FEMA regions

Snapshot of Findings

- The long-term inequities for marginalized groups are due to systemic forms of oppression.
- NGOs and governmental agencies are unaware of available support and lack essential resources.
- Developing and maintaining relationships takes time.

[1] FEMA, Climate Change (2021, February 24). https://www.fema.gov/emergency-managers/national-preparedness/climate-change

Findings

Survey and focus group participants found that hazardous events had the most impact on marginalized groups.

When asked which marginalized groups are most affected by hazardous events, survey respondents indicated persons with low incomes, elderly, people experiencing homelessness, children, women, immigrants, and Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) (Table 1). We found similar responses from focus group participants who identified marginalized groups such as BIPOC, undocumented immigrants, rural populations, children, and low-income households as being most impacted by hazardous events. Focus group respondents indicated that this was due to existing structural challenges, disenfranchisement, systemic and historical racism, colonialism, poor communication from federal agencies, and a lack of resources.

Table 1. Marginalized groups most affected by hazardous events

	N of respondents	% of respondents
Persons with low incomes	28	57.1%
Elderly	21	42.9%
People experiencing homelessness	18	36.7%
Children	17	34.7%
Women	16	32.7%
Immigrants	16	32.7%
BIPOC	15	30.6%
Mothers	15	30.6%
People with disabilities	15	30.6%
Rural residents	14	28.6%
Veterans	13	26.5%
LGBTQIA+	10	20.4%
No particular group or population is targeted	10	20.4%
Urban residents	9	18.4%

When asked to specify, top selections for survey respondents were Black (32.4%), American Indian or Alaskan Native (27.0%), and Biracial or multi-racial people (24.3%)

Respondents cited a lack of resources to support marginalized groups through a hazardous event.

Figure 1. Funding needs identified by NGOs and governmental agencies

Survey respondents were asked how they would spend grant money, if awarded, to support marginalized groups through a hazardous event.

Overall, responses centered on maintaining operations for their organizations. For those that answered "other," some specified what they would spend the money on, including relocation costs, community recovery education, supplies for those affected (e.g., clothing, etc.), mental health resources, funding to help pay for utilities for those affected, medical equipment, and the purchase of a larger facility.

Findings, cont.

Focus group and survey respondents agreed that trust is crucial to support marginalized populations during a hazardous event.

Respondents described the ways trust can be fostered and maintained between community members and governmental agencies. First, they suggested positioning oppressed individuals in a space that uplifts and highlights their voices, allowing for more thoughtful and intentional conversations. Next, they suggested that it was essential that agencies and organizations seeking to support marginalized communities are consistent and transparent in their communication and service. Another strategy they suggested focuses on building trust before a hazard impacts the community. Lessons learned by some focus group participants are shared below.

"...one of the best things about trust is the grace and mercy that come with it... If you're consistently transparent, do what you say you're going to do, don't over promise, then people are more willing to give you the benefit of the doubt if something happens that was not anticipated."

"Listen to the population you are serving and aspire to look like the communities you are serving."

"Trust building has to happen when nothing else is happening. We have a lot of communities that need a lot of healing. We need to find a way to bring it together block by block."

Figure 2. Summary of Findings

Long-term impacts for marginalized groups	Access to support and resources	The role of relationships and trust
• Structural racism and disenfranchisement exacerbate the impact of hazards for marginalized groups. • The long-term inequities for marginalized groups are due to systemic forms of oppression.	• NGOs and governmental agencies are unaware of available support and lack essential resources. • Voices of marginalized people are excluded from mitigation and recovery decision making.	• Developing and maintaining relationships takes time. • Deference, clarity, and consistency are essential attributes of communicating with community members.

Recommended Policies

Participatory research necessitates careful re-evaluation and definition of terms such as "solutions." Across this work (surveys, interviews, and focus groups), we noted that the act of speaking about and naming how marginalized communities have experienced and continue to experience challenges and obstructions related to accessing funds after a disaster is often directly associated with race and racism. We propose that, in participatory work, the act of naming is a critical part of solution-making and imagining. We have listed below proposed solutions co-constructed by community members, local government officials, and academics.

- **Provide greater access to emergency funds**. Respondents recommended developing a set-aside fund or some other mechanism to resolve the inequities faced by marginalized populations in gaining access to emergency funding.

- **Provide funding to hire more staff.** Local governments, NGOs, and faith-based groups see the growing number of climate-related events and are concerned about the inadequate number of paid staff in their offices.

- **Acknowledge and express value to marginalized groups and the organizations that serve them.** Respondents provided the following recommendations for governmental agencies: act on their agreements, alter policies based on feedback, allow communities to visualize an obtainable solution, listen without trying to fix issues, and follow up with questions.

- **Build trust through respecting diverse cultures and cultural norms and encouraging co-creation.** To build trust, service providers should cultivate cultural understanding of the community, be transparent and accountable, and be consistently involved in working with community members. Emphasis should be placed on co-creation of programs and plans that account for lived experiences and perspectives of marginalized people.

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