

Fire Disaster and Its Implications on Survivors and Social Work Practice: The Case of Rumah Lembang Sayat, Engkilili

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the implications of a longhouse fire on its survivors. It also presents the assistance that survivors received during post-disaster and the implications on the social work practice. It draws on qualitative research based on in-depth interviews with survivors selected through purposive sampling. The data of the study were analysed based thematic analysis. The findings revealed that the survivors faced both short-term and long-term implications after the fire disaster. The assistance received was mainly focused on responding to the short-term implications and was less focused on long-term implications. In the scheme of things, these implications bear on the social work practices as well as on the conditions of the fire disaster survivors.

Keywords: Fire Disaster, Long House, Social Work Practice, Survivor

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INTRODUCTION

Fire disaster is one of the most common disasters which may be natural or man-made. Natural causes may come from hot climate, volcano eruptions or man-made causes like fire disasters may arise from technological error or accidents. In Sarawak, longhouse fire is becoming a concern (Nais, 2018) and has resulted in over RM 10 million losses (Pei, 2019). Sarawak has recorded a total of 14 longhouse fires in just first eight months of 2019 and leaving 1300 villagers homeless (Pei, 2019). The longhouse fires have affected the villagers and local communities in different ways. This study aims to look at the implications of fire disaster on the local communities and to analyze the implications on social work practice revolving around post-disaster recovery and in a social development context. The location chosen for this study was Rumah Lembang Sayat Engkilili where a recent longhouse fire occurred when this research began. The findings highlighted in both long and short-term implications faced by the longhouse fire survivors are significant as longhouse fires are very common disasters in Sarawak. Moreover, these findings can be used as premises for a bottom-up approach to help those affected communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Impacts of disaster on survivors

There was not much past research done on longhouse fire disasters. While discussing the impacts of disaster topics such as psychological issues, impacts on economics and social impacts should be highlighted too. One of the most popular topics is on the psychological distress faced by survivors. According to Davidson and McFarlane (2006), disaster is a collective social suffering that challenges individual's capacity of adaptation that can lead to a range of mental health problems including post-traumatic psychopathologies such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This statement becomes evident as North *et al.* (1999) revealed that more than half of the research subjects were dissatisfied with their work performances and observed negative changes in their personal relationships, in addition to having symptoms of PTSD. The research subjects in North *et al.* (1999) research were based on the proximity of the subjects to the disaster. When compared to the setting of this research, such outcomes could be expected when research participants are based on the proximity of the occurrence of longhouse fire.

Keane (1994) mentioned the triggers of psychological distress faced by residential fire survivors. For example, loss of possessions and not having insurances to cover such loss gives a financial burden to the survivors. Gangemi (2003), as cited in Stephenson (2010), shared that “people in the caring profession such as priests and nurses were denied access to the area of the bushfires because they were not seen as accredited professionals by police”. It is argued that these ‘psychological first aid’ in the form of social contact and support should be allowed to access these areas because this may help the survivors to recover and communicate their emotions (Gordon, 1997 as cited in Stephenson, 2010). Having said that, doing this research on how longhouse fire survivors were impacted both in short-term and long-term to see how the survivors coped after the disaster and to see what kind of social intervention these survivors had access to.

Besides psychological impacts, they also have economic impacts on the survivors. Stephenson (2010) discussed on the loss of economic resources due to bushfire. For example, the economic losses mentioned were crops being destroyed, loss of homes and access to roads. The longhouse fires have resulted in millions of money and property loss (Pei, 2019). The homes were destroyed, and personal property of the longhouse dwellers was lost to fire disaster. This impacts the survivors economically because of the recovery of their longhouse and other basic needs to be paid.

Fires also caused cultural heritage loss. In the recent longhouse fire, several longhouses were earlier claimed as a cultural heritage of the community. According to The International Council on Monuments and Sites [ICOMOS] (2002), in Stephenson (2010), cultural heritage is defining as “the way of living developed by a community passed on from generation to generation, including customs, practices, places, objects, artistic expressions and values. Very often, cultural heritage is viewed as either “tangible or intangible”. Longhouses are where heirlooms and traditional crafts are stored and when these cultural properties are caught in the fire, it would cost the communities involved their cultural heritage. It takes time to rebuild these longhouses that were lost in the fires and for safety reasons, these wooden structures were replaced with concrete structures and not anymore displaying the authenticity of the traditional structure, hence losing a cultural value (Nais, 2019).

Disaster social work in Malaysia

Social work profession has always been involved in bringing about the change of the well-being of individual, families, groups, communities, the marginalized, minorities and society as a whole. When a disaster occurs, the welfare of the affected population is the main topic to be discussed either in the level of preparedness, during disaster or post-disaster and recovery. However, Pyles (2007) has a point in criticizing the social work practice in disaster recovery.

“A core and often neglected element of disaster recovery has been the rebuilding and community development phase. A review of the literature showed that social work has been less involved in this phase than in traumatic stress intervention and the coordination of relief efforts”

(Pyles, 2007)

Social work did not stress on social development in post-disaster recovery because of reasons such as involving focused attention on macro-level (housing policy, urban planning, and development of the economy) and that the social work education is heavily focused on human behaviour theories, mental health and organizational administration (Pyles, 2007). The approach in disaster management in Malaysia is following the examples from developed countries but with the implementation capacity of a developing country (Roosli & O’Keefe, 2013). In observation, issues highlighted were centered on manpower, the country’s economy and roles of social workers in Malaysia. Chan (1995), as cited in Rahman (2018), wrote that the disaster management in Malaysia has generally been considered as a government function and is largely based on top-down government-centred machinery.

In 2015, the National Disaster Management Agency (NADMA) of Malaysia was formed as Malaysia's national focal point for disaster management. In NADMA (2017), the roles and responsibilities under welfare are evacuating victims, preparing food for victims/duty officers, providing/managing places of evacuation and providing first aid. It is still missing the element of post-disaster social development as proposed by Pyles (2007). Lacking in such practice can affect the affected populations of disasters in the long term as post-disaster social development such as rebuilding their lives, homes and getting back to the normal livelihood is a tiring and a long process. The assessment work in any practice areas done by the social workers and, as highlighted by Carlo (2020), should be carried out not just as a requirement and procedure to determine what services could be offered. It should be undertaken from a holistic standpoint with the view of understanding the situations and identifying the underlying needs to come out with appropriate recommendations and interventions for the clients, and the environment or both. A holistic assessment on the fire survivors and their environment, and their implications and intervention not just for short-term but long-term must be in place. Again, Carlo (2020) emphasised that the assessment work should also be about reviewing and evaluating the situation or needs of the clients and also on the effectiveness of interventions that have been carried out for fire survivors, particularly in the context of this study.

Drolet and Ersing (2014) stated the need for a long-term disaster recovery and to develop new knowledge based on communities' experiences of disaster recovery. This is supported with the research done by Rahman (2018), whereby involving and empowering a community in disaster risk reduction programmes is the key to successful mitigation. It is believed that the affected communities are the best judges of their own vulnerabilities and can make the best decisions about their well-being (Yodmani, 2001, as cited in Rahman, 2018). Efforts on building a resilient community are crucial in Malaysia as disasters such as longhouse fires and floods are still very common and affected a large number of people. A community that is resilient towards disaster will be able to recover in a much shorter time (Chong, Kamarudin & Wahid, 2018).

METHODS

The study adopted a qualitative approach using a case study. Data were obtained through in-depth interviews with selected respondents using purposive sampling. This study is located in Rumah Lembang Sayat, Engkilili in Lubok Antu, Sri Aman district. This district recently experienced a longhouse fire affecting 167 residents (Urana, 2019) and is located approximately 20 to 30-minute drive from Engkilili town. The interviews were conducted in the Iban language. Materials used during data collection were audio recording software through a mobile phone, notes taking and a set of interview questions as a guideline. A total of 17 respondents were interviewed in the study and they are permanent residents of the longhouse, adult members and were present when the fire broke out. Data collection was done through interview only because this research aimed to look at the respondents' point of view, telling what they think about their situation. According to Taylor and Bogdan (1984), face to face interview encounters between the researcher and the respondents are conducted to understand their perspective on their experiences and situations as expressed in their own words. In this context of study face to face interview with the fire survivors are suitable in the context of the study. The data analysis was done in thematic analysis method. The transcriptions from the interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis to interpret the experiences of the longhouse fire survivors.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The initial target number of survivors to be interviewed was 26 each representing a 'pintu' (household). Due to availability issue (e.g. some were in the 'ladang' when the fieldwork was conducted), only 17 were interviewed face to face. As shown in Table 1, 12 survivors were farmers, two (2) women respondents were 'not working' and have health problems (knee injury), while two (2) were retired.

Table 1: Demographic profile of respondents.

RESPONDENTS	SEX	AGE	STATUS	OCCUPATION
1	Female	32	Divorced	Engkilili Internet Centre Manager
2	Female	51	Married	Retired
3	Female	51	Married	Not working
4	Male	83	Married	Farmer
5	Male	70	Married	Farmer
6	Male	69	Married	Head of village, Farmer
7	Female	40	Married	Farmer
8	Female	38	Married	Farmer
9	Male	83	Married	Retired
10	Female	52	Married	Farmer
11	Male	48	Married	Farmer
12	Female	49	Married	Not working
13	Female	54	Married	Farmer
14	Male	69	Married	Farmer
15	Female	44	Married	Farmer
16	Female	51	Married	Farmer
17	Male	53	Married	Farmer

Implications to survivors

Fire disaster has several implications on the survivors, namely physical, emotional and financial. The implications are not necessarily one-off effect, but these are related to each and every aspect of the survivors' lives, which both are short- and long-term implications. The longhouse fire survivors were impacted on short-term implications immediately after the fire whereas long-term implications after months from the fire incident.

In terms of health, the survivors' health was affected by their immediate surroundings, their age and the time fire disaster happened. The physical implications that the survivors described are in terms of their physical well-being such as having high blood pressure, weight loss, coughing and body aches. For example, whereas the elderly did not have any complications, such as high blood pressure etc., before the incident, they have developed such issue after it. The sharing of the survivors revealed that,

“The elderlies were affected in their health. Those who once did not have high blood pressure, they suddenly have high blood pressure. As for me, I lost weight from 50 kilos to 48 kilos. A loss of 2 kilos in a week only”

(Respondent 1, single mother, 32, Internet Centre Manager)

The survivors noted that they had excessive exposure to smoke, tension and due to the panic they faced when they had to carry and save their personal belongings from the fire.

“Someone even fainted that day because of the smoke. Even if we do not fell sick but our bodies were all sore from carrying the things.”

(Respondent 8, female, 38, farmer)

This finding was similar to the heroic phase as explained by Fahrudin, Baco, Hj Abdul Malek and Haji-Yusuf (2002), where people will struggle to prevent fatalities and minimize damage of their property.

Due to drastic changes in the survivors' immediate environment, it affected the survivors emotionally, where the survivors describe their feeling such as worrying, sleep-deprived, shocked/trauma, loss of appetite, overwhelmed, including mourning. These feelings emerged as they had to deal with multiple issues within a period of time such as losing their home, their properties and constantly worrying about how they could recover.

"Remembering our house, no place to stay makes us worry. Moreover, properties bought all these years disappeared in a short time. We worry about how we are going to collect those things again. That caused our health to deteriorate. Flashbacks of our house burning in front of our eyes give trauma."

(Respondent 1, single mother age 32, Internet Centre Manager)

"I was traumatized. Keep thinking about the incident. There was a lot in my mind. I lost interest in working. The land was already cleared for new crops but I did not continue to work on the land. I lost interest in working about two to three months. It was serious because we never experienced this in our whole life that it shocked us, traumatized."

(Respondent 17, male, farmer, age 53)

"No appetite to eat because the rice was not our harvest. We were used to eating the rice of our harvest."

(Respondent 3, female, unemployed, age 51)

"It almost felt like mourning, it felt as if my parents have passed away leaving me when I think of what happened."

(Respondent 6, male, Head of village, age 69)

"It is hard, felt like going insane, wanted to die. Tired of remembering it (fire incident), I can hardly sleep."

(Respondent 15, female, farmer, age 44)

These feelings were highlighted as normal stress reactions when under these circumstances (post-disaster) in Fahrudin *et al.* (2002). Disasters challenge the individual's capacity of adaptation which can lead to mental health impacts (Davidson & McFarlane, 2006). The survivors turned emotional and their physical health condition was also affected, especially when the existing was less than ideal and had to deal with the unexpected loss. Losing their family home, bereavement, a threat to life and their behaviour during post-disaster are viewed as 'psychological toxins' in which the disaster has impacted mental health (Davidson & McFarlane, 2006). They explained that these 'psychological toxins' have greater impact on those in close proximity to the location of the disaster.

The survivors too faced several types of losses that eventually affected them financially. Losing their home lead the survivors to rebuild a temporary shelter and re-purchase essential things such as cooking and eating utensils and toilet bowl. Rebuilding the temporary shelter had already cost the survivors a lot and they still had to cover expenses to rebuild another longhouse. In addition, expenses such as payment of road tax, bills, and school fees for those who have children, burdened the survivors heavily.

"It was hard managing our money because if it wasn't because of the fire, we could have saved more because that time palm oil was quite expensive. Moreover, July was time to pay the car's road tax but the house also burnt down that month."

(Respondent 1, single mother age 32, Internet Centre Manager)

“Nothing, because when we had money it was used to buy things. It was used to buy things for the store, for us to build this temporary shelter to stay. There was aid given but it was used to buy zinc roofing, buy toilet bowl, pipes.”

(Respondent 17, male, farmer, age 53)

“Pay workers for the farm which is using a lot of money from the aids given. Now it is all finished, just use once; moreover, I still have kids who go to school.”

(Respondent 3, female, unemployed, age 51)

Survivors faced difficult times to manage their household finances as there was a lot of expenses to consider. They needed to divide their finance to save for rebuilding their new longhouse, buying materials for their current temporary shelter, car loan, electricity bills, their children’s education and meeting their daily needs. Moreover, they have lost most of their personal properties and home to the fire, and not having an insurance scheme to cover the losses contributed to more psychological distress (Keane, 1994).

Another reason as to why the survivors were impacted financially was from the loss of their cultural heritage and heirloom such as ‘*tajau*’ (traditional treasure jar), ‘*engkerumung*’, ‘*gong*’, and ‘*tawak*’ (traditional music instrument).

“Cannot sleep because I kept thinking about the things that were gone, the old heritage inherited from ancestors are all gone to the fire.”

(Respondent 6, male, head of village, age 69)

All gone, ‘tawak’ (traditional Iban music instrument), ‘benda’ (traditional ceramic treasure jars) and ‘engkerumung’ (traditional Iban music instrument).”

(Respondent 2, female, retired, age 51)

Losing these heritage items impacted them as much as these things hold a high value in the Iban society. The community viewed these relics as irreplaceable and rare possessions. Finally, other financial impacts were caused by the loss in farming produce. As displayed in the survivors’ demography, the main economic activity in the community was farming. The loss of farm produce such as seeds and other crops directly affected their income as farmers.

“Black pepper was all lost to the fire. There was a lot, it was the season, just ripen and harvested, more than 15 sacks were burnt.”

(Respondent 2, female, retired, age 51)

“That time I wanted to carry some of my black peppers but the fire came so I could not continue to do so. They were all gone to the fire.”

(Respondent 4, male, farmer, age 83)

“All potato leaves are gone. These ones are newly planted crops because the previous ones are all taken out to build shelter on this land” [The word ‘shelter’ here refers to a temporary shelter for the respondent’s household after the longhouse was burnt down. It was built on a patch of land used to grow potato leaves].”

(Respondent 3, female, unemployed, age 51)

The survivors had lost their farm and where farming was the only source of income. Their crops or farming produce were either lost to the fire or sacrificed to provide land to build their temporary shelter. Fire disaster has also resulted in cultural impacts (Stephenson, 2010) where, in this study, the survivors have lost traditional heirlooms. Losing the longhouse to the fire has impacted them socially and culturally as the longhouse was a place of social gathering, where the way of living including customs, objects, artistic

expressions and values (Stephenson, 2010), was passed from generation to generation. The new longhouse that will be rebuilt can never replace the authenticity of the traditional structure, hence losing its cultural value (Nais, 2019).

Fire survivors had no choice but to build a temporary shelter before they can recover and rebuild a new longhouse. Note the word temporary, the shelter was built based on the car shed and storeroom (*Rumah Padi*) that they have left from the fire and was made from plywood and zinc roofing. This shelter was built without adequate planning as they needed immediate shelter after the fire incident. These issues (safety, hygiene, flooding and hot) have interrupted their daily way of living and added to the challenge to adapt to their new shelter.

“Cannot sleep, no appetite to eat, there was a lot, worrying. After the house burnt down, we slept here [car shed] but the walls were not built yet, camps that do not have covers.”

(Respondent 2, female, retired, age 51)

“Staying in this shelter [Store room] is very hot, there is nothing here. We cannot accommodate guests, no place to stay, we eat, we sit and sleep at the same spot.”

(Respondent 6, male, Head of village, age 69)

“Why is that like that (referring to wiring in her shelter [car shed]) I asked him. I got injured, I knocked my head because of the wood” [Respondent 10 was worried about how the new wiring was done in her temporary shelter since the temporary shelter was poorly built and prone to flooding. The respondent was worried that the poor wiring would make things worse as she has already suffered some minor injuries from staying in the poorly built shelter.]

(Respondent 10, female, farmer age 52)

“Water will be up to my knees when it rains. It will be flooded. If it does not rain, then it will be very hot.” [car shed]

(Respondent 11, male, farmer, age 48)

The long-term impact that survivors faced such as safety, hygiene, comfort and structural issues are indirect impacts that the survivors go through as not much assistance in social development was provided in post-disaster recovery (Pyles, 2007).

Assistances received by the survivors

The survivors in the study did receive assistance from different sources in response to their different needs. The main assistance that they have received was financial aids. They received financial aids from the Welfare Department of Sarawak (JKMS) and donations collected from nearby longhouses. The financial aids were distributed to the head of the household of each family. More money was given to families with more family members and children who are still going to school.

The survivors also have received support such as food assistance. Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) gave food essentials such as rice, salt, cooking oil, bread and sugar. Besides, nearby longhouses helped to cook meals for the survivors while the wet food came from JKMS. However, the food aids with the collaboration of JKMS and nearby longhouses just lasted about two weeks after the fire incident.

The types of assistance such as financial, food and health that the survivors received were only in the first month after the longhouse fire incident. Although some of the assistance received, for example, the food aid such as rice lasted long, other needs such as the survivors' mental health in coping with their new living conditions were not quite being addressed despite the presence of health assistance. The result has shown that there is a need for social work roles is assisting the survivors facing the 'second disaster' (Fahrudin *et al.*, 2002). 'Second disaster' refers to the implications such as paperwork, insurance claims and bureaucracy before

the survivors can regain their sense of stability. Therefore, social work practice is lacking of the element of disaster recovery in rebuilding and developing the community (Pyles, 2007).

Health aid was also available where the survivors were given free check-ups from the Health Ministry and those who were sick were given medication accordingly. The survivors were also assisted in legal procedures such as making their new identification cards and birth certificates.

They were also given timber, nails and roofing materials to be used to build their longhouse. Friends and family also helped by providing them clothing, supported in cleaning up the longhouse area, and helped organised things in their temporary shelter.

Drolet and Ersing (2014) highlighted the fact that there is a need in long term recovery for social work practice to back up and support by the communities' experiences in disaster recovery as the communities are the best judges of their own vulnerabilities and can make the best decision for their well-being (Rahman, 2018). Therefore, the findings of this study provide significant contribution to developing disaster recovery framework for social work practice in the local context.

Limitations of study

This research was conducted in only one specific longhouse in Sarawak because resources such as time and funding were lacking. Therefore, findings obtained are not likely to be generalized although longhouse fires are quite common in Sarawak. Knowing the limitations of this study and the researcher's first experience in conducting research, new researches can develop a more inclusive (geographically) research from these findings. Extending more research areas can help develop more data and improvement of services in the future.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, as findings have proven, longhouse fire impacts are more than just being homeless. It affects the survivors in different aspects of their life be it physically, psychologically, financially and socially. It is seen that a longhouse community is thrown off course in their social system. These findings should be useful for social work practicing agencies such as the Welfare Department to plan and restructure interventions especially for longhouse fire cases in the future. The practice framework of social work in disasters can be reviewed and reconstructed to address the needs of the survivors both in response and recovery phases. The works of Carlo (2020), which emphasized on the assessment carried out by the welfare workers in Malaysian context, should be strengthened. The findings of this study have implications on the social work practice in Malaysia, which requires the perspectives of welfare workers to widen their scope and exploration of assessment by looking at the fire survivors' systems, their physical and social interactions, and their relationship with the environment as a whole. These perspectives, as Carlo (2020) stressed, between people and environment could be fully understood only in terms of their social relationship where each continually influences the other within a particular context. In this way, it could subsequently improve the welfare services provided to disaster survivors in the future.

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