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social  
work



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# Social Work

# and

# Disaster management

# Why disaster management?

- Climate change/crisis is happening
- Focus on mitigation & adaptation
- European Environment Agency report ('24)
  - [European Climate Risk Assessment — European Environment Agency \(europa.eu\)](https://www.europa.eu/european-climate-risk-assessment)
- It's a matter of Social Justice   
Social Work has a crucial role in disaster management



# Social Work & disaster management

professor Margaret Alston  
Q&A

case: floodings in  
Belgium'21  
interview Social Workers  
Verviers (social services)





# Professor Margaret Alston

**Social Work and Disasters: a handbook for Practice**



Questions?



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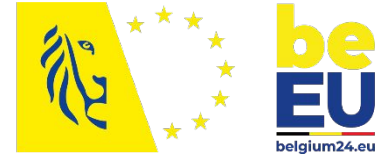
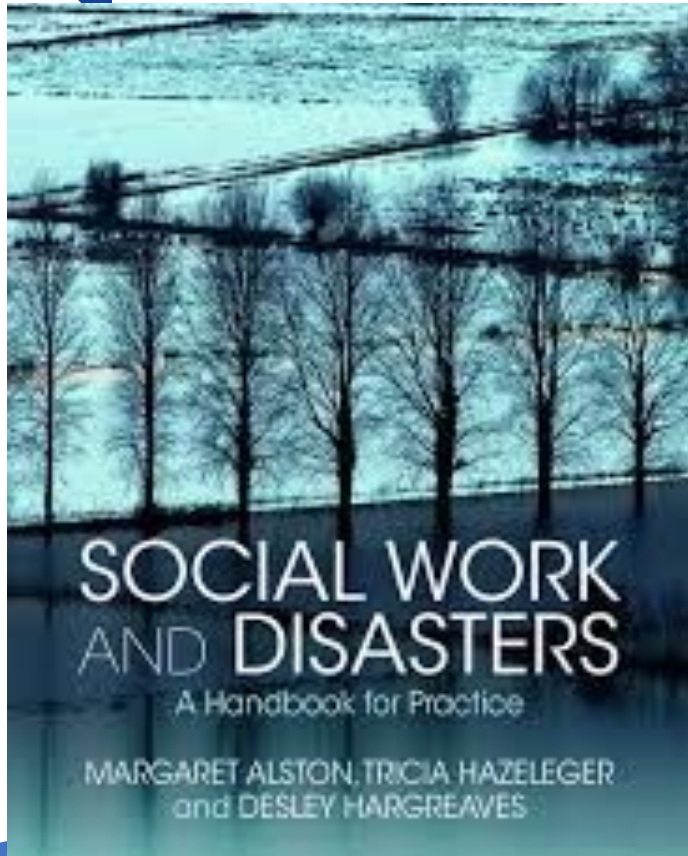
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# Adapting social

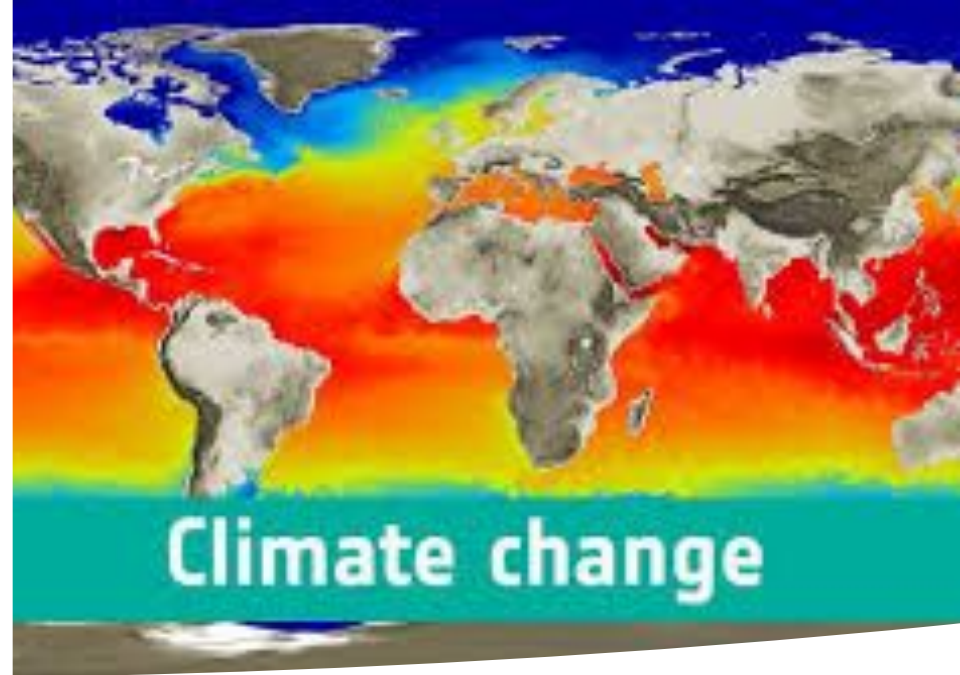
# work practice

# following disasters

# Professor Margaret Alston

# Defining disasters

- Disaster – an event that causes major losses to people and destruction of place. It can result from a natural or human-induced event or from intentional human actions.
- Natural disasters – earthquakes, storms, floods, fires
- Environmental disasters resulting from some human-induced intervention – mudslides resulting from land clearing, droughts resulting from overgrazing, sea level rises resulting from climate changes caused by a rise in carbon emissions
- Environmental disasters resulting from direct human intervention – oil spills, water contamination from industrial waste
- Disasters directly relating to human action – terrorist acts, conflicts



Pivotal moment in earth's history.

Climate changes, environmental destruction, pandemic

Need for social solidarity and global connectedness evident

How will social work adapt?



# What's the problem?



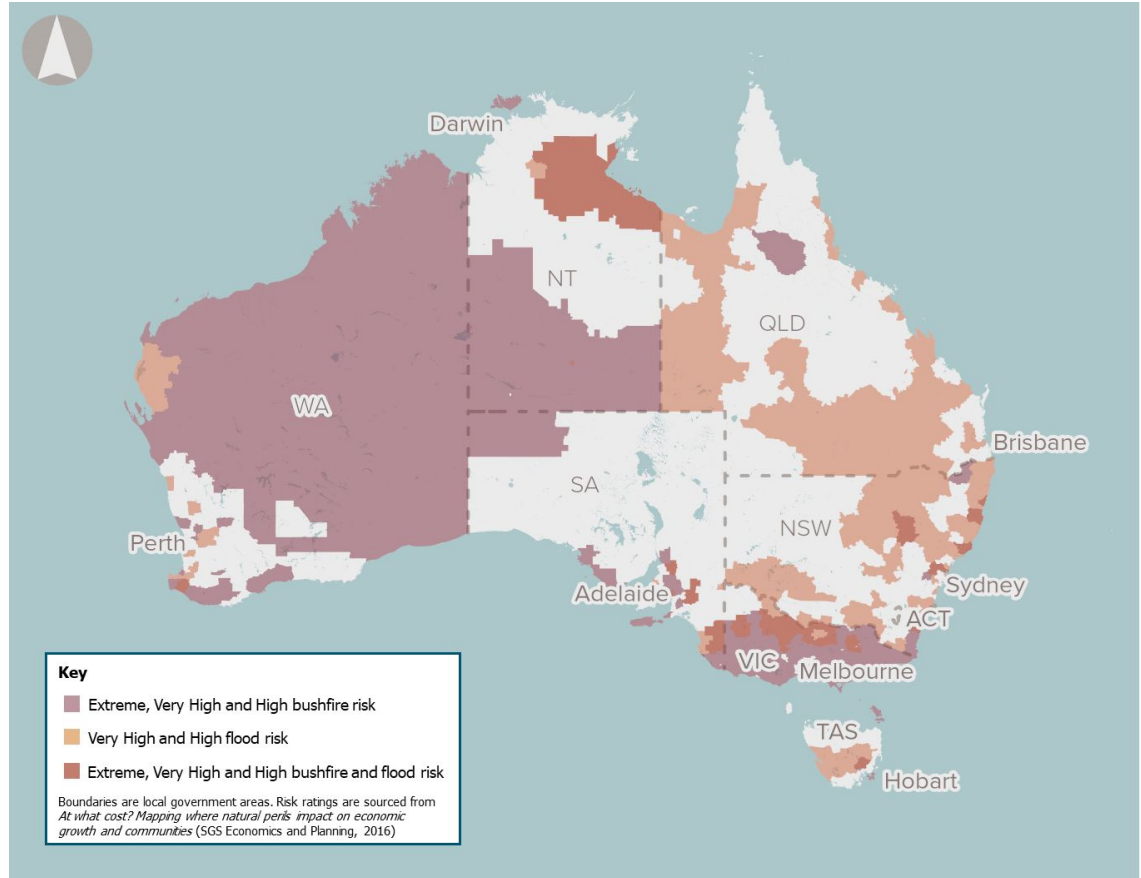
- **Climate change**

- Increase in catastrophic and slow onset environmental events
- Likelihood of temperature rises
- Sea level rises, changing seasons
- Will create significant social impacts
- Major effects on most vulnerable
- CC is both a social and environmental justice issue
- Social Workers have much to contribute addressing the individual, family and community level impacts
- We have a legitimate voice

## **Global pandemic**

Global health crisis

# Australia very vulnerable





**THE GREAT DELUGE:  
AUSTRALIA'S NEW ERA OF  
UNNATURAL DISASTERS**



- Recent natural disasters have been traumatic and costly for Australian communities, and recovery will take many years. Under climate change projections, natural disasters are expected to impose a worsening burden on emergency responders and communities, and to further challenge the management capabilities of governments.
- **Australian Parliament 2022**



**THE GREAT DELUGE:  
AUSTRALIA'S NEW ERA OF UNNATURAL DISASTERS**

Climate change  
examples from  
Australia—  
extreme  
weather events

## **Incremental disaster**

Widespread drought early 2000s  
– claimed to be worst drought in  
800 years



What does drought look like?





# Impacts of Drought

- Accelerated ongoing rural restructuring
- Loss of farm families, farm workers
- Amalgamation of properties into large holdings
- Closure of small schools and bus routes
- Decline in infrastructure
- Job losses
- Health stresses
- Solastasia – sadness re changed landscape



# Slow erosion of spirit

Mental health and welfare issues

Social isolation in a barren landscape

Gendered impacts



Official publication of the NSW Farmers' Association

Issue 12 - June 2009

ANNUAL REVIEW EDITION

## Tackling mental illness

The NSW Farmers' Association has led a new era of cooperation in rural NSW to tackle the mental health crisis gripping many rural and remote communities. A significant step forward for mental health in such areas is the newly established NSW Farmers' Mental Health Network, provided the State Government with a mental health blueprint.

The blueprint recommends 22 areas of action ranging from mental health first aid training, farm agribusiness and access to financial counsellors and drought relief workers.

"It's the drought clearly compounding the local stress on farm families, NSW Farmers' Mental Health Network brought together a group of key stakeholders in the area of rural mental health to find solutions for rural NSW."

Forum held in June last year resulted in the formation of the Rural Mental Health Network. NSW Farmers' Blueprint for Maintaining the Mental Health and Wellbeing of the People on the Farm.

The network has grown considerably since its formation, with 19 organisations now represented, including charitable organisations, support and rich bodies, government agencies and other organisations such as the Country Women's Association (CWA).

Network spokesperson and NSW Farmers' Mental Health Network, Jack Laurio said the group first of its kind in the country and was formed to provide a voice of action towards improving mental health services and access to rural NSW.

Thousands of volunteers and their families in NSW are still relying on the help as mental ill-



Insert photo: NSW Farmers' President Jack Laurio launches the NSW Farmers' Rural Mental Health Network in Sydney.

ness because one of the biggest problems facing many rural communities," Mr Laurio said. "Sufferers need someone to stand up and speak for them. The Rural Mental Health Network is pre-

pared to take up this challenge, and is committed to working together to ensure that farmers and their families get all the support they need when the going is tough," he said.

The blueprint has been established after a number of years by the Network.

"I encourage both the Federal and NSW governments to show their support for the Blueprint by helping the Network urgently deliver practical solutions so that we can improve the mental health and wellbeing of our rural communities," Mr Laurio said.

The Association's Rural Affairs Committee Chair, Alan Brown, has since led a delegate rural mental health network members to a table meeting with the Hon. Christie Burton,

## TIME FOR A SOLUTION

icide deaths amongst male farmers and farmers are now double that of any other profession.

access continue to have inferior access to support services.

The NSW Farmers' Association Drought Summit in Parkes in May 2009 followed extensive

discussions, the ramifications of depression, financial hardship and loss will continue for many years.

But even in times outside of drought, farmers'

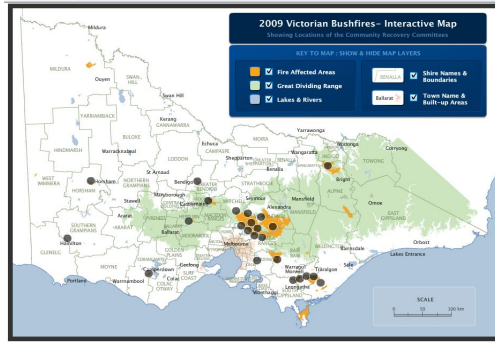


# Catastrophic disasters

More visible, more immediate – fires, floods, heat waves



# Map of affected areas – Black Saturday bushfires 2009 and 2019-2020 Black Summer bushfires



## Black Saturday 2009

400 000 hectares burnt

## Black Summer 2019/20

5.5 million hectares burnt –  
almost size of Ireland (6.9 million  
hectares)

More than the entire country of  
Belgium (3.05 million hectares)



# Outcomes of the 2019-2020 Black Summer fires



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11784 fires

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25 deaths

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5.52 million hectares

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2476 houses

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3 schools

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3284 facilities

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13000 livestock and

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800 million native animals





After the fires

## Black Saturday February 2009-The consequences

173 people lost their lives  
Over 2000 homes lost & 78 towns  
impacted  
3 schools destroyed and 47 damaged  
55 Businesses destroyed



Destroyed:  
430,000 Hectares burnt  
11,000 stock  
10,000 km fencing  
1,000,000 wildlife  
Over 3550 agricultural  
facilities destroyed

# Lismore floods 2022

## Women's leadership and a community 'saving itself': Learning from disasters

Health and well-being impacts of the Northern Rivers Flood 2022



Wendy Foote,  
Margaret Alston,  
David Betts and  
Tracy McEwan



More than 4000  
homes uninhabitable



# Lismore flood disaster 2022

- **Social workers**
  - Responding to need
  - both counsellor and survivor
  - Social workers in Lismore floods were exceptional
- **Factors that emerged in the floods**
  - Failure of government
  - Community saving itself
  - Gendered health and wellbeing issues
  - Trauma
  - Local Hubs



# Research Black Saturday (2009)

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- Straight after the disaster counsellors offered to those most affected – 600 appointed in the first 4 weeks – many people took this up. Social workers from across Australia were brought in to help

## Issues

- Loss of family members, neighbours, community
- Housing
- health
- Significant increase in violence against women
- Relationships broke down
- Those interviewed 5 years after noted that the fire response was 'profoundly disempowering' -

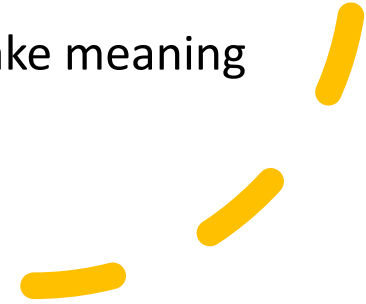






# Disaster responses – helpful and constructive

## • **What to do in immediacy of disaster**

- Avoid ‘welfarising’ people
  - Provide information
  - Provide a link between community and government and other supports
  - Bear witness
  - Be present with people in their trauma experience
  - Support people as they seek to make meaning from their experience
- 

# Beyond Bushfires report – 10 years after Black Saturday

- High fire impact communities after 10 years –
- only 62.6% felt they were fully or mostly recovered
- Only 33.5% felt their community fully or mostly recovered



# Beyond bushfires report 10 years on

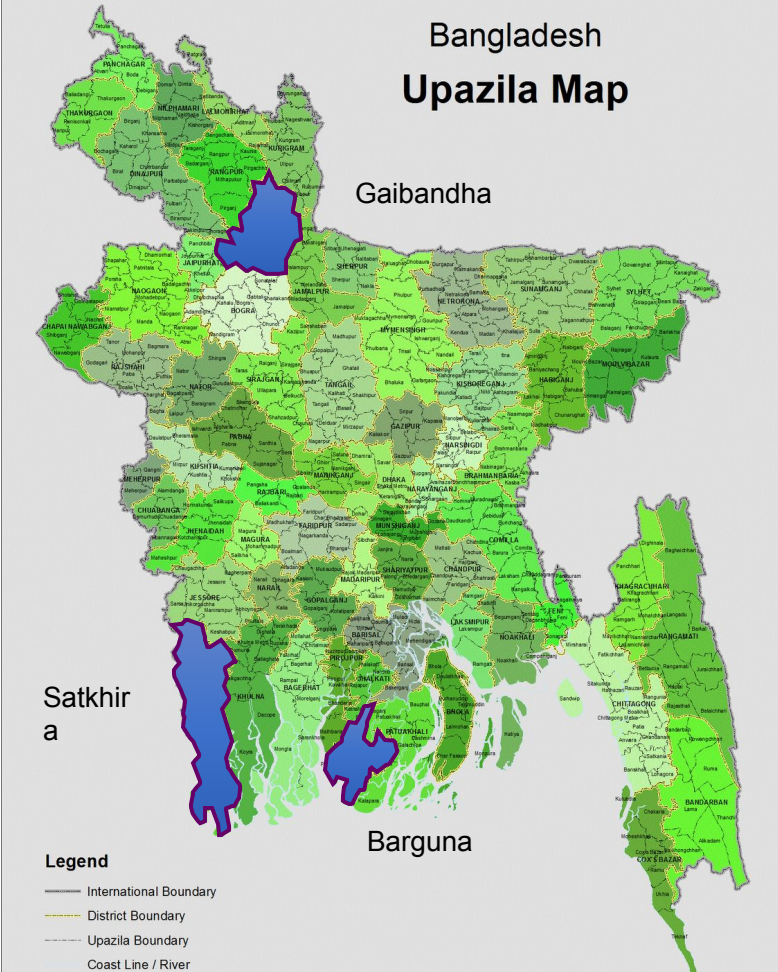
- Evidence that disasters cause long-term impaired psychological functioning
- PTSD, depression, substance abuse
- Strong evidence also that people are resilient as a result of disaster
- Predictors of worsening PTSD – being female, fear for one's life in the fires, and subsequent trauma (Bryant UNSW)





Disasters are universal – social workers grappling with disaster work across the globe

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# Disasters

Assessing gendered impacts of climate disasters

Gender is a critical concept in disaster experience

Research in Bangladesh



## Village women – Bay of Bengal

- Global environmental disasters –not just an environmental catastrophe - need for HR based, socially just, environmental and gender conscious climate policies



# Climate changes and disasters

- complex social outcomes
- Destruction of communities
- Displaced people
- Outmigration
- Gendered impacts
- Increases in violence
- Shelters unsafe for women
- Poverty \malnutrition
- Food insecurity



# Social impacts of various disasters

- Extreme heat – fatalities, impacts on health, health related illnesses, mental health
- Severe weather – injuries, fatalities, mental health
- Changes in ecology – rise in diseases such as malaria, dengue fever etc
- Increasing allergens – respiratory diseases, allergies
- Water quality issues – cholera etc
- Water and food security impacts – malnutrition, diarrhea
- Environmental degradation – forced migration, conflict, mental health





# Who is most vulnerable

Vulnerability influenced by the factors that shape one's life:


age, gender, level of poverty, education, employment, access to resources, family structure etc and

shaped by circumstances –

type of disaster, its dimensions, infrastructure damage, employment status, business infrastructure, livestock loss

- Who is most vulnerable? –
- those who are already disadvantaged and marginalized communities
- Climate refugees
- Older adults – particularly older women
- Children and families
- animals





## Key factors that will affect vulnerable people

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- Loss of family / neighbours / community
- Violence / relationship breakdown
- Loss of social supports and connectedness
- Loss of infrastructure
- Lack of financial and other support
- Heat waves – impacting those without airconditioning



# Climate change causing major upheaval across the world – where do social workers fit?

- Firstly let's examine how increasingly severe weather events are framed.
- How are the international community and national governments dealing with CC?



# Climate deniers / sceptics

- Climate deniers ....
- That it is 'natural' part of weather cycle
- That the science is 'flawed'
- That it is a conspiracy of the left
- Nothing we can do
- This view now tempered by International actions and major events



# Climate change scientists

- Environmentalists, scientists ....
- Catastrophic weather events are becoming more frequent and extreme
- Temperatures are rising
- 2050 is the tipping point
- Must act immediately
- Carbon neutral and CC actions occupy international arenas



Climate denial/obfuscation reduces our capacity to act as good global citizens

- Political debate re cc – has been dominated by climate deniers and massive denial in policy and political circles

- This ‘white noise’ obscures the need for human rights-based actions



## Seeing the link between climate change, environmental disasters and social issues

- Has the social work profession absorbed the need for major attention to social justice, environmental justice and gender justice?
- Where does social work fit in disaster preparedness, disaster response and long-term disaster renewal?
- If major climate denial / obfuscation dominates policy, how can we hear the silenced – those most vulnerable to disasters?

**EUROPEAN HEAT WAVE**  
FURNACE Paris to hit hottest temperature in history at 42C tomorrow as Europe sizzles in new heatwave





How can we ameliorate?

- Need to be thinking of CC as a constant feature to be addressed as a factor in our lives and work
- Build structures and opportunities to address the new reality
- Understand complex social arrangements and power relations within impacted communities



# Social Worker roles?

Ecological social work describes social work that addresses relationships between living organisms in an ecosystem – hence the relationships not just between people – but between people and the environment in which they live

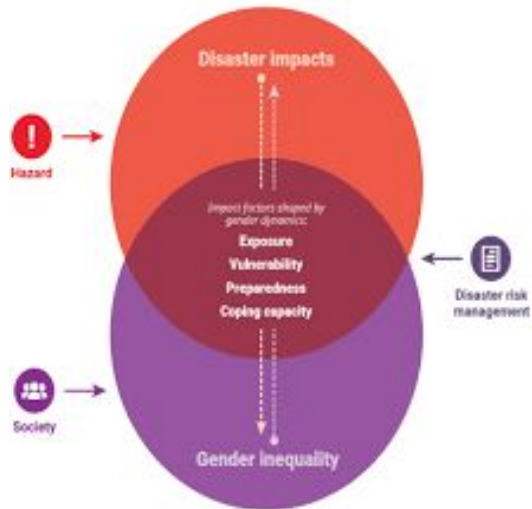
Ecological social work mirrors and extends our understanding of person-in-environment

# We need to understand ecoanxiety and solastasia

- Ecoanxiety – chronic fear of environmental disaster
- Solastagia – emotional distress caused by climate change to familiar surroundings



# We need to understand gender complexities



- Preparedness projects
- Disaster response – women setting up community supports, hubs, communications
- Disaster vulnerability – rise in Violence against Women

## WOMEN IN DISASTERS

Women and girls account for over half of the 200 million people affected annually by natural disasters.

Women play significant roles in all stages of disaster and climate risk management.

# What role do social workers have?



- At the **individual level** – reducing carbon footprint
- At the **clinical level** – working with individuals and families
- At the **community level** – working with communities, organizing, advocacy, research
- Engaging in **disaster preparedness** measures
- **During and immediately after a disaster** and long-term renewal
- Assisting in shelters, helping organize community support, funding, post-disaster rebuilding



Social workers  
support people in  
evacuation  
centres and  
camps



# What to know about shelters

- Practice setting up shelters – simulations!
- Ensure each local government area has a disaster plan with key organisations and individuals understanding their roles
- Practice a disaster striking
- Meet regularly –Set up a vulnerability register in each local community to document those who might need additional help
- Separate areas for women and children
- Security in shelters 24 hours
- Policing shelters, provide adequate supports



Post-disaster recognise community women's responses – often working alongside social workers

- Early warnings
- Community women respond by setting up safe places
- Food, goods, dry clothes, coffee, counselling spaces etc
- Work with and support these spontaneous actions
- Provide funding
- Burnout high



Social workers are employed in organisations that will be involved – **‘business as usual’ jobs**. Work impacted by crises

- Hospitals, health, income security, housing
- Government public servants
- NGO managers
- NGO workers
- Case managers
- Researchers





# Social workers

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- Counsellors and may also be victims themselves
- Lismore social workers worked over and above their role expectations
- Working to ensure their clients were safe
- NB significance of Indigenous workers



Social workers develop rituals to assist recovery



# How can social workers build our capacity to ameliorate?

- Be conversant with SDGs
- Engage with policy makers
- Be part of the early response units
- Understand the experiences of people
- Understand the level of vulnerability
- Know your community
- Work with community
- Undertake disaster preparedness projects
- Lobby for resources
- Educate yourself and your community on CC and potential vulnerabilities
- Push for national and international action
- Check your local, state and national disaster plans – are social workers mentioned? If not why not?
- Check with your national association



# Critical concepts

- Vulnerability
  - Adaptation
  - Capacity building
  - Transformative resilience
- 
- **Front of mind factors**
    - Social justice
    - Gender justice
    - Climate / environmental justice



# Disaster preparedness



# One example of new ideas - **Vulnerability register** – identify those most vulnerable

- Voluntary recording of those who may be vulnerable in an emergency – those living with a disability; elderly people living alone, others who may need assistance in the event of a disaster



# Vulnerability assessment

- An informed profile of the community
- Understand the nature of potential disasters
- Social characteristics of the community
- Transport systems, health and welfare infrastructure
- This will enable a more informed approach to preparedness, and response to climate-induced disasters and will facilitate lobbying where necessary



# Building Resilience



Identify vulnerabilities



Lobby and advocate for resources



Assess opportunities for reducing risk



Take actions to build sustainability



Work with local communities and leaders



Facilitate emerging leaders



# Barriers to resilience

- The scale of disaster or threat of disaster
- The access people have to resources
- How risky change might appear
- The trust people have in governments and institutions
- How safe it feels to continue as has always been done
- How stable are government structures

# Main issues clients present with

*increased health and mental health issues reported by clients;*

*isolation of clients from their support networks;*

*increased reports of domestic violence;*

*increased homelessness and financial concerns.*

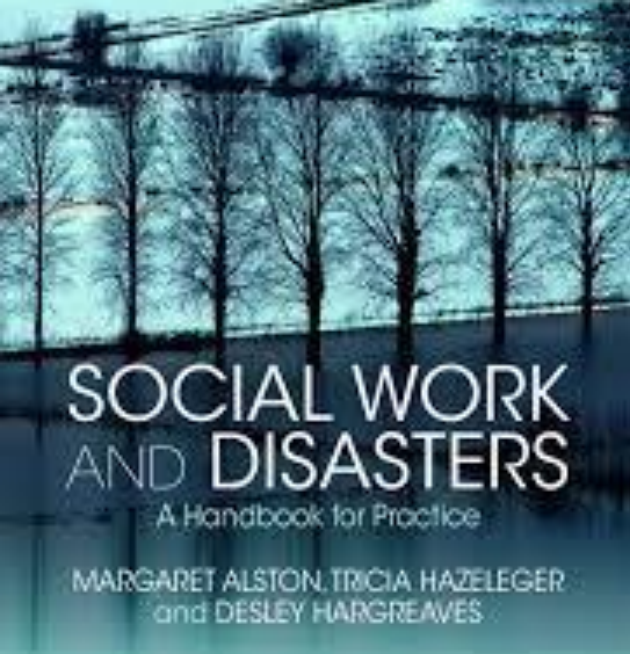
Pivotal moment for global community and for social work

Disasters will no longer be spasmodic – but continuing

Pandemics will continue

Social workers will be critical front-line workers in this disaster space – are you ready?





- Familiarise yourself with the language of disasters and emerging disaster practice.
- Work with policy makers to establish disaster preparedness and response mechanisms
- Social work is now on the frontline of this new field of practice.
- Social work practice will be reshaped by disasters

Questions?



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# Verviers

**Social Work during and after the floods (2021)**

# Verviers (Belgium)

55 000 inhabitants

employment rate is 9% lower than the rest of Wallonia

22% of the children in families without income from work

10% of jobseekers are unemployed for more than two years



# Floods (July 2021)

one of the hardest hit regions

9000 without shelter or basic amenities

some neighborhoods were not evacuated, social workers had been instructed by the fire department to say it was safe to stay

highest number of fatalities (4)





# Interview



Serafina Fortuna & Philippe Hardy (social services Verviers)

warning: auto-generated subtitles in English





# **Social Work in Verviers**

- the interview has moved me
- Reactions / questions?
- Preparation
- Community building
- Follow-up care – psychosocial support for professionals

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# Thank you!



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