



Building community disaster resilience: How social workers in Trinidad and Tobago conceptualize and operationalize community disaster resilience

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Abstract

When addressing the impacts of disasters on human beings, it is crucial to consider that many postcolonial societies, like those in the Caribbean, face both natural hazards and deep-rooted social inequities. These intersecting challenges shape their vulnerability and require that disaster resilience approaches focus on addressing historical and systemic inequalities. However, government planners continue to struggle with determining who can best contribute to resilience building. While disaster resilience is mainly seen as a responsibility of local government, this study argues for the inclusion of social workers in strengthening community disaster resilience in Trinidad and Tobago. This study examines disaster resilience through the lens of social workers, drawing on (1) Mayunga's capital development theory and (2) scholarship on the three "waves" of resilience. These waves include efforts for communities to "bounce back" by restoring prior functioning, "bounce forward" through adaptation and growth, and "critical community praxis," which advances social and environmental justice. Findings indicate that disaster resilience strategies in Trinidad and Tobago primarily emphasize "bouncing back" and "bouncing forward," rather than promoting transformative social and environmental change. The findings highlight that current approaches often fail to address systemic inequalities and structural barriers hindering long-term disaster resilience and advocate for a broader role for social workers in disaster management and environmental justice. As a profession, social work integrates the mission of strengthening community resilience while addressing historical and social inequities. The recommendations advocate for a more transformative approach to sustainable disaster resilience in the Caribbean, prioritizing equity, justice, and long-term community empowerment.

Keywords: disaster resilience, repeated flooding, social work, capital development framework, community resilience, Trinidad and Tobago

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1 Introduction

Climate change and extreme weather events such as flooding have become increasingly recognized as global challenges (Bahall et al., 2025), affecting communities across continents and disproportionately impacting vulnerable populations. Social workers worldwide have been identified as critical actors in mitigating these impacts, supporting community resilience, and promoting recovery after disasters through psychosocial interventions, advocacy, and participatory planning (Dominelli, 2015; Drolet and Choudhury, 2024). Despite this global recognition, evidence from

the Caribbean remains limited, highlighting the need to understand how social workers operationalize resilience in small island developing states facing unique environmental and socio-economic vulnerabilities.

Latin America and the Caribbean have been recognized as the region with the second-highest exposure to extreme climate events worldwide (FAO, 2025). The region is characterized as a "multi-risk" environment which is conceptualized by de Milliano et al. (2015) as experiencing several types of disasters such as repeated flooding, hurricanes, volcanic activity, pandemics and political, economic, and so-

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cietal upheavals. Environmental disasters such as flooding, landslides, rising sea-levels and earthquakes have been increasing with frequency, intensity, and impact because of climate change (Khunwishit et al., 2018; Spencer and Urquhart, 2021). This has been evident in several countries in the Caribbean, including the twin-island state of Trinidad and Tobago, which has experienced an increase in the frequency and intensity of floods (Seemungal, 2022; Bahall et al., 2025). While communities located in low-lying areas and flood plains have been historically affected by flooding, recent flooding episodes have notably become more widespread and destructive. One such example occurred in October 2018, when several communities in Trinidad experienced serious destruction caused by severe flooding (Baig, 2018) with an estimated number of 150,000 people and 4,100 households affected and significant financial and property damages (Fontes de Meira and Phillips, 2019). Several other small-scale destructive floods occurred, and November 2022, there was again widespread loss as intense rain caused severe flooding with multiple communities being totally cut off from access to flood relief efforts. Yao et al. (2024) explained that flooding exacerbates inequalities. Since it is expected that the intensity of flood disasters and the corresponding losses in Trinidad and Tobago are expected to increase because of climate change, there is an urgent need to strengthen communities to withstand and recover from the negative effects of flooding or other natural disasters.

Research shows that prior to crises or disasters, there is a need to strengthen intersectoral coordination between disaster management agencies at the national, regional, and local levels (Bang et al., 2019). One approach that has been recognized as critical in supporting disaster-affected communities, is building community disaster resilience. Joseph et al. (2020) explains that community resilience refers to the ability of a community to utilize its available resources in the management of adverse situations. The Hyogo Framework for Action 2005–2015: Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters (UNISDR, 2005) identified building community resilience as a critical aspect of disaster risk reduction (Khunwishit et al., 2018). A main priority of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 (UNDRR, 2015, para. 11) is “enhancing disaster preparedness for effective response and to ‘Build Back Better’ in recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction.

Community disaster resilience is defined by Cardona (2005) as the capacity of an affected community to absorb the adverse impacts of an event and recover from these. Resilience conveys a notion of ‘bouncing back’ which reflects its Latin root “resiliere” which means “to jump back” (Paton and Johnston, 2006). Gaborit (2022) states that building community disaster resilience requires a cross-disciplinary approach. Joseph et al. (2020) identifies the input of disaster management organizations and other segments of society as critical for effective response towards various hazards and to build a resilient social capital. In small island developing states, the question emerges: Who is responsible for building community disaster resilience? A key focus of the social work profession is environmental justice (Dominelli, 2012) and the recognition of the inseparable interconnection between the social and ecological aspects of human develop-

ment. Social workers are called to support recovery efforts in many disaster contexts (Harms et al., 2022) and to build social capital and resilience (Dominelli, 2012). Social work is a distinctive profession with a broad scope of practice which occurs within the micro, mezzo and macro levels. At the micro level, Social Workers provide psychosocial and mental health support to individuals and families; at the mezzo level, social workers focus on community development and at the macro level, social workers influence policy and advocate for marginalized and underserved populations. Given this diverse mandate, social workers are often engaged in environmental issues (Dominelli, 2009).

Despite the commitment by the profession to intervene to support communities affected by disasters, literature that focuses on social work practice in disaster contexts in the Caribbean is still in its infancy. This study sought to examine the ways social workers understand the concept of community disaster resilience and how they see themselves contributing to that process in Trinidad and Tobago. The objectives of the study were to:

- examine how social workers in Trinidad and Tobago construct community disaster resilience
- identify the current approaches used to develop community disaster resilience in communities in Trinidad and Tobago and
- describe the potential contribution that social workers can make to building community disaster resilience in the Caribbean.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Community Disaster Resilience

The term ‘resilience’ is drawn traditionally from the physical sciences, but has been applied to many different disciplines, including social work, psychology, geography, and environmental studies. Over the past thirty years, resilience has been increasingly used in areas such as environmental justice and disaster management. While there has been widespread acceptance of resilience in disaster management and environmental studies, many authors challenge the operationalization of the term and argue that resilience is very broad concept (Brinkmann et al., 2017; Meerow and Newell, 2016; Mayunga, 2007).

As early as 1973, Holling defined ‘resilience’ as the measure of the capability of an ecosystem to maintain stability, and to absorb changes and persist (Brinkmann et al., 2017). This definition has been challenged over the years, as it seems to focus more on the physical ecosystem and does not fully include the relationship between hazard impact and human vulnerability (Brinkmann et al., 2017). The expanded notion of disaster resilience includes understanding the impact of hazards on the well-being of people in the community. This understanding allows for the analysis of issues around environmental (in)justice, human vulnerability and strengths of communities in building resilience.

2.2 Social Work and Community Disaster Resilience

Nyahunda et al. (2019) affirms that the issue of climate

change is one of the mandates of social work, as climate change negatively impacts the well-being of individuals and disproportionately affects marginalized populations. Social workers have been known to perform significant roles during all phases of the disaster management process through micro, mezzo and macro interventions (Sim et al., 2013). For instance, Dominelli (2009) and Zakour (1996) state that social workers provide support at the individual, family and community levels when disaster or a natural hazard occurs, as well as contribute to building social capital in disaster risk reduction programs before and after the disaster.

Dominelli (2012) recognizes that social workers must practice ‘green social work’ which calls for social workers to advocate for the rights of people and develop new approaches that would engage stakeholders in developing locality-specific and culturally relevant responses to problems related to the environment. Additionally, Bogdan et al. (2024) argues that a recurring recommendation for disaster resilience is for ‘increased, and inclusive engagement concerning disaster awareness and preparedness activities at the community level’. Social work at the mezzo and macro levels involves working with and within communities to organize and build resilience. Given its broad reach across societal levels, social work is well-positioned to facilitate disaster risk reduction programs and provide support. This approach addresses concerns like those raised by Alcántara-Ayala et al. (2020), who argue that “there is a lack of integrated efforts to establish a sound policy for reducing disaster risk to counterbalance the existing concentrated endeavors in disaster management.”

2.3 Social Work Interventions in Disaster

Findings from several studies show that social workers respond to the mental health well-being of individuals and families affected by disasters. Many social workers engage in psychosocial care, assessment, case management and counselling after a disaster (Becker, 2009; Hickson and Lehmann, 2014). The modalities of the psychosocial interventions are diverse, as social workers deliver support through casework, groupwork and community interventions (Harms et al., 2022). Social workers’ engagement in group work and psychoeducation pre and post disasters have been seen as beneficial in building community resilience (Powell and Leytham, 2014). Cooper et al. (2018) explained that in some cases, psychosocial support is provided to disaster management volunteer counsellors who were exposed to the disaster. Social work interventions in disaster management also involve crisis intervention (Becker, 2009).

Nascent literature also highlights social workers engaging in the use of a bottom-up approach to working in communities affected by natural disasters (Alipour et al., 2015). This approach fosters community problem-solving that recognises expertise in the hands of members of the community. Bottom-up approaches are participatory in nature and serve to build social capital, while promoting resilience among community members (Dominelli, 2015). Dickson et al. (2022) agree that social workers perform various roles in disaster risk management. In a study conducted with social workers in Zimbabwe, Dickson et al.

(2022) found that social workers engage in roles in three main areas: disaster preparedness and prevention, disaster response and relief and disaster recovery. In the field of disaster preparedness and prevention, social workers are engaged as educators, community workers and disaster program planners. As disaster response and relief personnel, social workers perform the roles of counsellor, case manager and administrators of social protection. Finally, in the field of disaster recovery, social workers engage in the work as advocates, monitoring and evaluation officers and development facilitators.

2.4 Challenges in Social Work Practice in Disaster Management

Despite the call for social workers to engage in various roles in disaster management processes, literature suggests that many social workers experience challenges which hinder their effectiveness in doing so. These challenges include lack of guidelines for social work practice in disaster management (Sim et al., 2022), inadequate training (Javadian, 2007; Rock and Corbin, 2007), an unclear mandate for social workers in disaster management (Mathbor, 2007) and working with dynamic local cultures (Cahill, 2007). Mpambela and Mabvurira (2017) state that social work is recognized as a profession that has made significant contributions to community development and improving the lives of vulnerable groups. However, they agree that the roles of social workers with regard to natural disasters are still muted by professional elusiveness in many societies.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

2.5.1 The Three Waves of Resilience

Recent theorizing on community disaster resilience highlights the need to be responsive to hazards in ways that “foster proactive and systemic approaches in preparing for the unexpected and indirect effects of global change” (Moench et al., 2011). Atallah et al. (2021) identify three “waves” in international resilience literature. These three “waves” of resilience include (1) “bouncing back,” as described by Alexander (2013) which describes resilience as a protecting function; (2) “bouncing forward,” is explained in the literature by Ungar (2010) which frames the understanding of resilience as community adaptation; and (3) “centering at the margins” which examines how inequities such as income inequality, inequality due to structural barriers, coloniality and marginalization overlap and challenge opportunities for resilience (Atallah, 2016).

2.5.2 The Capital Development Theory

Mayunga (2007) argues that assessing community resilience is a complex process. This is because community resilience is a product of the dynamic interplay between people/ community and the environment. This study uses the capital-based framework developed by Mayunga (2007) to analyze and assess community disaster resilience strategies. This framework is especially helpful in this study as its focus is building resilience which is consistent with the strengths-based perspectives that is a foundation of social work prac-



Fig. 1. The Capital Approach to Community Disaster Resilience. (Source: Author's depiction.)

tice. The capital-based approach is an important “shift in thinking away from a deficit- or vulnerabilities-based approach in assessing and managing risk to an approach based on capacity building” (Cox and Hamlen, 2015).

The central concepts of the capital-based approach, according to Mayunga (2007), involves building various forms of capital within the community. The underlying assumption is that various forms of capital are necessary for building a sustainable community. Therefore, if capital increases, so too, does the potential for reducing disaster impacts and hence the more resilient the community becomes.

There are various categories of capital that exist within communities, and which contribute to the resilience of communities. The capital approach to community disaster resilience includes building capital in five main categories: social; economic; physical; human and natural (Fig. 1). These forms of capital are explained as follows:

- Social capital is defined as an aspect of social structure and includes the establishment of trust and norms (Mayunga, 2007) and social networks (Cox and Hamlen, 2015) that facilitate coordination and cooperation. In the context of community resilience, it reflects the quantity and quality of social bonding and cooperation. An analysis of social capital in a community involves examining impacts and strengths of different segments of the population, including women, the elderly and children. This is because disasters may result in differential effects for different groups of people, depending on the particular socio-cultural context of the community (Partelow, 2020). Panday et al. (2021) argue that social capital is a key element in the recovery from and resilience to disasters.
- Economic capital refers to the financial resources that people use to achieve their livelihoods. According to Feofilovs and Romagnoli (2017) economic capital refers to the “direct financial resources of a community necessary to reach its levels of livelihood”. It includes savings, income, investments, and credit. Eco-

nomical capital contributes to building community resilience as the possession of economic capital increases the ability and capacity of individuals, groups, and communities to absorb disaster impacts and speed up the recovery process. According to Buckle et al. (2001), an economy that is stable and growing will enhance resilience. However, Buckle et al. (2001) also has a counter argument that an unhealthy or declining economy may represent increasing community vulnerability.

- Physical capital involves infrastructure and buildings such as roads, bridges, and communication and transportation systems. These systems ensure proper functioning of the community, especially during times of evacuation or when relief must enter a community post-disaster. Adequate facilities are important to ensure that people have resources and sufficient support arrangements during emergencies. Communities also consider the availability of proper shelters and emergency buildings as components of physical capital that can help in disaster management (Mayunga, 2007).
- Human capital is defined as the capabilities in the working-age population that allow it to work productively with other forms of capital to sustain the economic production (Smith et al., 2001). Human capital consists of the knowledge, skills, and health that people accumulate throughout their lives, which enable them to be productive members of society. Human capital also includes the availability of volunteers in the community. However, Baez et al. (2010) argue that disasters do not affect all people equally and recognise that natural hazards do affect human capital. Therefore, according to Mayunga (2007), human capital development is central to the capital-approach to building community resilience.
- Natural capital refers to natural resources that are renewable and non-renewable, such as water, minerals

and oil, land, and the ecosystems that maintain clean water, air and a stable climate (Smith et al., 2001). Several authors emphasize the importance of natural capital on the well-being of individuals. According to Bateman and Mace (2020) “the natural capital concept is fundamentally an anthropocentric framing based on the understanding that aspects of nature, in certain forms and functions, underpin human wellbeing and are therefore a central concern for sustainable development”.

2.6 Summary of Literature Review

Existing scholarship conceptualizes community disaster resilience as a multidimensional and construct, shaped by social, economic, human, physical, and natural capital, with social workers occupying key roles across disaster preparedness, response, and recovery through participatory and strengths-based practice. However, despite Trinidad and Tobago’s exposure to repeated flooding, there is a marked absence of qualitative, social work practitioner-centred research that examines how social workers in this context understand and interpret community disaster resilience in their everyday practice. Current literature offers limited insight into the meanings social workers attach to resilience, the practice strategies they deploy to build it at the community level, and the contextual constraints and enablers shaping their interventions within small island developing states. This study addresses these critical gaps by foregrounding social workers’ voices through qualitative inquiry, thereby generating empirically grounded, context-specific knowledge that advances theoretical clarity, informs practice, and strengthens policy approaches to community disaster resilience in Trinidad and Tobago.

3 Methodology

The study utilized a qualitative methodology to understand the lived experiences of social workers as they engage in building community disaster resilience in Trinidad and Tobago. Qualitative methodological designs were also used in several other studies to describe the experiences and reflections of social workers in relation to disaster practice (e.g., Hay et al., 2023; Koketso et al., 2021).

A phenomenological approach was used to capture the actual experiences as perceived and lived by the social workers. According to Ranse et al. (2020) “phenomenology is concerned with the essence of things as they are appearing in the conscious awareness of the first person”. In this study, community resilience was considered a dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon, which referred to the community’s ability to withstand adversity, including disasters, and to adapt and thrive in the face of challenges. Contextualizing community resilience as a phenomenon in this study is important, as it allows the researcher to capture the in-depth descriptions of a phenomenon “embedded within the research participant’s views and perspectives” (Qutoshi, 2018).

Positionality of Researcher. As researcher, I occupied an insider-outsider positionality in relation to the study

context. As a trained social worker with professional experience in working in a community setting in Trinidad and Tobago, I had contextual familiarity with the nature of community-based practice. At the same time, I acknowledge that in my current role I occupied an outsider’s positionality as my primary role in this engagement with participants was as a researcher. Understanding these dual roles shaped the need for reflexivity throughout the research process. This was done by keeping reflective field notes, which were used to reflect on how my positionality framed my assumptions, and might shape the framing of questions, interactions with participants, and interpretation of data. This ongoing reflexive engagement strengthened the interpretive transparency and supported the privileging of participants’ meanings within the analysis.

3.1 Research Questions

The overarching research question guiding this study was: What are the experiences of Social Workers in building community disaster resilience in Trinidad and Tobago? The sub-questions were:

- How do social workers construct community resilience?
- What approaches are used by social workers to develop resilience in communities affected by flooding in Trinidad and Tobago?
- What are the challenges and barriers encountered by social workers in building community disaster resilience in Trinidad and Tobago?

3.2 Sampling Method and Recruitment

This study employed nonprobability sampling, utilizing purposive and snowball techniques to select participants. Although snowball techniques are utilized when participants may be invisible or hard to attain, this technique was used to reduce the time to acquire participants. Information on the study was shared with various social service and social work agencies in Trinidad and Tobago. A formal letter was sent to the agencies outlining the study’s objectives and requesting permission to distribute an e-flyer to its employees. The e-flyer provided details about the study’s purpose, participant eligibility criteria, and contact information. Interested individuals called the number provided on the flyer and expressed their willingness to participate.

The researcher screened all callers to ensure he/she met the selection criteria and then an interview was scheduled. The study also used a snowball technique to acquire other participants by asking persons to share the e-flyer or the contact of the researcher with others who they think meet the criteria for selection.

The selection criteria included individuals employed as social workers with a minimum qualification of a bachelor’s degree in social work and experience working in a community which experienced any form of loss or destruction caused by a natural disaster. The sample consisted of 17 social workers who met the criteria for participation in the study.

Table 1. Participants' demographics.

Participant	Gender	Social work qualification(s)	Number of years working in Community affected by flooding	Practice setting
P1	Female	BSc./ MSW	5	Community Youth Work
P2	Female	BA	7	Community Development
P3	Male	BSc.	11	Rural Development
P4	Male	BA	6	Community Development
P5	Female	BA	5	NGO
P6	Female	BSc.	8	Social Development Agency
P7	Female	BSc.	6	Social Development Agency
P8	Male	BA	9	Social Development Agency
P9	Male	MSW	4	NGO
P10	Female	MSW	5	NGO
P11	Female	BSc.	2	Community Youth Work
P12	Female	BA	12	Medical Social Work (community based)
P13	Female	BA	11	Psychiatric Social Work (community based)
P14	Female	BSc.	3	Community Policing
P15	Female	BSc.	9	Family Services
P16	Female	BSc.	8	Family Services
P17	Female	BSc.	11	Family Services

(Source: Own fieldwork in 2023–24).

3.3 Data Collection and Data Analysis

Based on the phenomenological nature of the study, data was collected from semi-structured interviews with participants. An interview guide consisting of 12 open- and closed-ended questions, supplemented with probes, was used to structure the interviews. The semi-structured interview lasted approximately 45 minutes, either virtually or physically, and allowed the participants to describe their experiences in an unhindered manner. The researcher employed the use of prompts to encourage the participants to provide detailed responses (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). All interviews were audio recorded.

The research was approved by the Campus Research and Ethics Committee. The identity of the participants was protected by assigning a letter and number for coding purposes which were only known to the researcher. The participants signed an informed consent form, which outlined their rights as participants, and details regarding the procedures, confidentiality, and rights to terminate or refuse to volunteer in the study. Once participants provided their consent and signed the agreement, the interviews began.

At the end of the interviews, the researcher manually transcribed the data verbatim. The researcher conducted quality assurance checks by matching the transcripts with the audio recordings to ensure credibility was maintained. The transcripts were shared with the participants, and they were allowed to verify the contents, adjusting their responses, if they felt it was necessary. Once the transcripts were approved by the participant, the researcher analyzed using the six-step guide to thematic analysis as postulated by Braun and Clarke (2006). Codes were developed, categorized and several themes emerged. Rigorous comparisons between the themes and transcripts were conducted.

4 Findings

4.1 Participants in the Study

Seventeen participants volunteered for this study, all of whom held a minimum of undergraduate degree in Social

Work. Their experience working in flood-affected communities ranged from 5 to 11 years. The field of practice included community development, youth work, rural development, working with NGOs, social development and community organizing. The social workers were employed in both the government service and NGOs. The demographics of the participants are outlined in Table 1.

4.2 Responses to Research Questions

RQ1: How do social workers construct disaster resilience? The study participants defined disaster resilience through three key components: (1) enhancing community capacity to mitigate the negative effects of disasters, (2) building social and economic capital to strengthen disaster response, and (3) addressing vulnerabilities stemming from social and economic inequities, particularly among marginalized groups.

P2 stated:

“Building disaster resilience means helping individuals, groups and communities to understand the causes of disaster and how their actions can reduce the occurrences of disasters or lessen the severe consequences of it. As a community development officer, I do this during my meetings with community councils and groups. Education is key. I also see the need for capacity building, ok? That doesn’t only mean education. It is also about strengthening the social fabric of society to support one another, especially those who are most in need.”

P6, who is employed by a Social Development Agency stated:

“I think disaster resilience starts at the level of the community. Many people in communities need to know the effects of their actions, because a lot of our problems are caused by humans...We have people building with no environmental approval, throwing trash away in rivers

and blocking waterways. You know there are a lot of people living in poverty, and they are more at risk. Like they build on the riverbanks. That is all they can afford. And they have been living there for generations. It's just that with climate change and how bad the weather patterns are now, that there is more and more destruction. We have to find ways to support these people because they do not have the resources. But disaster resilience is also about using a strengths-based approach to harnessing the power of people in the community to help out one another. Even by supporting those who cannot afford sustainable building."

RQ2: What are the current approaches used to develop resilience in communities affected by flooding in Trinidad and Tobago?

The participants described three main approaches they used to develop community resilience in communities affected by flooding. These approaches were: the social capital development approach, economic development approach and the human development approach. However, they also highlighted that these approaches focus on returning residents to their pre-disaster state or helping them to create adaptive strategies. During the interviews, the researcher asked probing questions to understand what participants viewed as shortcomings of the current approaches used. The responses indicate that participants believed that current approaches fell short in connecting disaster resilience with climate change and did not sufficiently support the vulnerable or historically marginalized groups in communities.

4.2.1 Social Capital Development

Four of the participants described the current approach used in building disaster resilience involved building social capital. P1, P2, P4 and P11 explained that the primary focus of their work was on the maintenance of social bonding in the community. P2 explained that her work included designing events such as community family days and cultural activities. She stated:

"I mainly implement community activities such as family days and community cultural programs. These are important because the activities bring the community together and help community members to build relationships. When a disaster happens, the people who develop positive relationships tend to help one another out."

P1 and P11 also shared that their work involves building the social bonds of youth in the community. P11 explained that she engages in the community to promote the inclusion of young people and youth participation. She explained that this is done by "building youth groups and empowering youth group members to increase youth participation in the communities".

4.2.2 Economic Development

Three of the participants explained that their work is meant to promote the economic development of members in the community. P2, P3, P4 and P9 shared that they have implemented community-based entrepreneurship and small business projects. According to P9:

"Over the past years I have worked with communities to provide skills training opportunities and micro entrepreneurship projects such as short training courses in skills such as barbering, making cakes and pastries, drapery and landscaping with a business development component. The short courses help people to earn a living."

P4, who works in community development also highlighted the National Policy on Sustainable Community Development for Trinidad and Tobago, 2019–2024 as a framework which guides his actions. The community based economic capital development efforts formed part of the services delivered in the community. However, he admitted that there is no systematic evaluation of the outcomes of these projects.

4.2.3 Human Capital Development

Six participants described their agency's work in building community resilience framed in

terms of human capital development. P1, P2, P4, P6, P10 and P11 explained that they worked in communities to build the education and skills, health and well-being of community members. P1 stated:

"Before COVID-19 lockdowns, we held several projects in communities that promoted youth civic engagement and volunteerism. These skills are important in building community resilience."

P2 and P10 explained that they are actively involved in community education programs which promote healthy lifestyles, mental health awareness and personal development. P4 stated:

"The community education programs are one or two-day workshops. We do (sic)

everything from mental health awareness sessions and personal development topics such as time management, healthy lifestyles and emotional intelligence."

4.2.4 Disaster and Crisis Management

Three of the participants explained that their work in communities is mainly focused on disaster risk management and mitigation using a disaster and crisis management approach. P5 described her work as mainly responding to crisis which occurs during and after a disaster. According to P5:

"I respond to the disaster crisis. I provide psychological first aid and work on the immediate

needs of the community such as providing food, water and materials to help with re-building. I do not work with an agency that provides long-term care.”

RQ3: What are the challenges and barriers encountered by social workers in building community disaster resilience in Trinidad and Tobago?

4.2.5 Top-down approach to community disaster resilience and mitigation

Several participants in the study stated that a major challenge to building disaster resilience is the top-down approach used in disaster risk reduction in communities. These approaches use international benchmarks and processes developed by international NGOs such as the International Red Cross. The processes, according to P2, did not fully integrate local culture and resources into the interventions in communities. The top-down approach and international approaches were described by P2 as:

“We get directions on how to work in communities at the national level... I think these directions come from the best practices of international agencies. We also get training sometimes from the Red Cross. Not much is done in terms of meeting the felt needs of members of the community. I think people could come together... building networks so they can be more resilient to disaster. The culture of the community is important. If we do not see that people can contribute to how they improve their own area, then we are not using the strength of people in the community.”

P4 also shared:

“I do community needs assessments and community profiles. The next step should be to organize the community into addressing the issues affecting people. I do not think enough priority is given to the results or outcomes in the needs assessments. We usually implement national programs. So general programs are implemented in communities throughout the country. These are not tailored to fit the local culture.”

P15, P16 and P17 explained that local government officials and disaster management agencies do not understand the potential contribution that social workers can make to building resilience and disaster risk reduction. Rather social workers are primarily seen as strengthening families, they are called out to do assessment of families to determine the extent of loss and provide psychosocial support to the families in need. P6 and P7 explained that their role in disaster management mainly involves the provision of grants to replace some of material possessions lost in flooding. P7 states:

“It is unfortunate that we don’t really engage with people in the communities on a long-term

basis on disaster resilience. For instance, my work is activated when the community has a flooding issue. I have no opportunity to go beyond this. I see a need for us to link people with other resources, but this is not necessarily our mandate. Outside of the times when there are disasters, our work in communities involves providing social welfare needs. The people in communities are not really involved in the process. They provide information on their loss of appliances and furniture but not much else.”

4.2.6 A mandate to return to pre-disaster state

Six of the participants (P1, P7, P12, P13, P15 and P17) in the study explained that they believe the agency’s mandate in rebuilding communities affected by disasters focused on returning to pre-disaster states and linking the family to counselling. According to P16:

“After, we [social workers in the agency] walk about the community and conduct assessments to determine what the family has lost. We write reports, and these reports are used to support the family in receiving a grant or compensation to repurchase an appliance repair their property. Families are also told of the ways they can access counselling, which we provide in our office.”

They explained that their job descriptions did not explicitly include disaster-related interventions.

4.2.7 Insufficient Appreciation of the Value of Social Workers

Several of the participants expressed disappointment that social workers were not valued for the contributions they can make to building community disaster resilience. According to P3:

“There are lots of ways social workers can work in communities to improve community disaster resilience. But I do not think policy makers know of the skills that social workers have. Sometimes I do not feel social work is appreciated where I work because I am not engaged in using all my skills. The job specification does not give me a chance to show all that social workers can do.”

P6, P12 and P13 also shared similar views. According to P6:

“I have social work qualifications, but my work is mainly about (provision of) welfare grants. I think social workers can do more to build community strengths, but my job is very limited. More about what I can do with what I have.”

P12 shared that there is a need for social workers to be employed as heads and directors of agencies which focus on disaster and community resilience:

“In the Caribbean, disaster management is put as a responsibility of engineers, builders and contractors. You know, people use words like re-building. So that is what is throwing off the work that social workers do in building community resilience. The emphasis on resilience should also focus on strengthening social solidarity in the community. Not enough persons are employed in the upper hierarchy of disaster management agencies, and therefore very little is now about the potential of social workers to build community resilience through engagement with communities, building social capital and addressing inequities which make some groups more vulnerable.”

4.2.8 Gaps in agencies' hiring practices

All the participants agreed that there was a need to integrate disaster management more fully into social work agencies across multiple sectors in Trinidad and Tobago. Participants believe that agencies involved in disaster governance should also recruit more social workers. P4 explained:

“My agency hires community workers. But some employees come into the job with CSEC (equivalent of High School certificates) and a one-year certificate in social work which does not offer them in-depth community organizing or community development skills. There are people who do certificates in human resources, public administration and management who are employed in community development. Local government should also hire social workers to build resilience.”

5 Discussion

This study sought to understand the experiences of social workers in building community resilience in Trinidad and Tobago. The main findings describe the ways in which social workers construct community resilience, the approaches they adopt to build community resilience and the challenges they encounter in the process. The study found that social workers in Trinidad and Tobago define community disaster resilience in two ways. Firstly, social workers describe community disaster resilience using a restorative model. This conceptualization of resilience seeks to restore communities to the state before the occurrence of the disaster event. This notion of “bouncing back” suggests that efforts to build community resilience are focused on returning the community to pre-disaster state, as described by Alexander (2013) which returns the community to a place of vulnerability. The second way social workers define community resilience is through the concept of “bouncing forward,” as described by Ungar (2010). The notion of “bouncing forward” suggests that some social workers focus on building community resilience in sustainable ways where they see the possibilities of communities adapting and strengthening to withstand future crisis events. These conceptualizations are similar to the first two “waves” of community resilience as

described by Atallah et al. (2021). The findings also show that social workers in Trinidad and Tobago do not conceptualize community resilience using a critical or social justice-informed lens as described by Atallah et al. (2021). In this regard, the participants failed to frame community disaster resilience in ways that support critical community praxis and show an understanding of how “disasters are embedded in patterns of inequities and social suffering, determined by life-world conditions and caused by interplays between material, psychological, and socio-political processes that create disproportionate adversities in marginalized communities” (Atallah et al., 2021). These findings highlight the need for changes in the social work education curriculum in Trinidad and Tobago to integrate critical and social justice-oriented approaches to disaster resilience.

Findings in the study also showed three main approaches used in building community disaster resilience in Trinidad and Tobago, specifically social capital development, economic development and human capital development. Mayunga (2007) identified these as three areas in building community disaster risk resilience; however, the strategies described by participants appeared to adopt a predominantly top-down approach, which may not fully respond to the specific needs of communities repeatedly affected by flooding. An alternative would be a stronger focus on participatory, bottom-up approach, which actively engages community members in identifying vulnerabilities, designing interventions, and leveraging local knowledge.

The findings suggest that social capital development efforts appear limited in its scope and nature. Social workers promoted social capital development by building youth and community interest groups, facilitating meetings and activities, cultural events and community family days. In this case, developing social bonds and cohesion amongst community members may be an unintended consequence of these activities. However, there is lack of any articulated plan for social capital development.

Economic capital development is another approach used by social workers in building community disaster resilience in Trinidad and Tobago. The findings show that economic capital development is mainly promoted through community-based entrepreneurship programs. The aim of these projects is to build income-generating activities in the community. The primary beneficiaries were unemployed women and youth. The lack of systematic evaluation of these projects, however, does not provide a window to measure its impact on community disaster resilience. The findings also show that social workers use a wide range of projects to develop human capital within communities. These activities include education and training in health and well-being.

Social workers also encounter several challenges in building community disaster resilience. While the approaches used to build community resilience may be useful, the study showed that the use of these approaches is top-down and fails to integrate a participatory approach that involves community members as main actors in the process. Alipour et al. (2015) and Dominelli (2015) cautioned against using top-down approaches and advocated for grassroots or participatory approaches to working in communities. Using a

more participatory approach can also promote the development of indigenous, cultural resources in building resilience. This study's findings also reinforce the findings by [Sim et al. \(2022\)](#) and [Mathbor \(2007\)](#) who argue that social workers are often challenged in working in communities because of lack of guidelines for social work practice in disaster management and unclear mandates.

Recent regional experiences further underscore the relevance of these findings. Preparedness actions observed during Hurricane Beryl which affected countries such as Grenada in 2023, and most recently, Hurricane Melissa which devastated the island of Jamaica, also highlights the importance of early coordination, community mobilisation, and risk communication. However, these actions were largely operational and infrastructural, with limited visible integration of psychosocial preparedness or community-based mental health strategies. This supports the current study's findings that social workers' engagement in disaster resilience remains insufficiently embedded within formal preparedness planning. Social workers are uniquely positioned to contribute to preparedness by facilitating psychosocial readiness, strengthening social networks, and supporting anticipatory coping strategies within communities, yet their roles remain underutilised within national and local disaster governance structures. The absence of explicit social work leadership in preparedness planning reflects a broader gap between disaster management systems and social development approaches to resilience.

Finally, the study findings indicate a need for community disaster resilience to be integrated into the social work curriculum in Trinidad and Tobago, as advocated in disaster literature ([Javadian, 2007](#); [Rock and Corbin, 2007](#)). Learning outcomes should focus on building a critical approach to analysis of community disaster resilience, disaster management, social justice and on centering power on marginalized groups or those more vulnerable in communities. Social workers also felt underappreciated and the roles they perform were largely under-utilized in building community disaster resilience. This echoes the arguments by [Mpambela and Mabvurira \(2017\)](#) who conclude that the roles social workers can perform with regards to natural disasters are still muted due to a poor understanding of the profession in many societies.

6 Limitations

The study explored the experiences of social workers in building community disaster resilience from the perspective of social workers themselves. This means that the data largely consists of the social worker appraising his/her own work in communities and this may give rise to bias. In order to mitigate this, the researcher used several probing and clarifying questions and asked for detailed descriptions and illustrations of their experiences.

Another limitation of the study involves the fact that some social workers worked in communities which were affected by flooding as far back as 2018. While this gives us a longitudinal view of the work of the social workers in the community, much is left to the memory of the social

workers to provide insight into this. Given that this study employed purposive and snowball sampling with only seventeen participants, the findings may not be transferable to social workers in other contexts and should be interpreted within the specific sample and setting studied.

7 Conclusion and implications for the Study

This study was exploratory and is the first of its kind that examined the experiences of social workers in Trinidad and Tobago in building community disaster resilience. The findings contribute significantly to literature on disasters in small island developing states in three key areas: how social workers define community resilience, the approaches currently used to strengthen disaster resilience, and the opportunities for social workers to be more fully integrated into disaster resilience strategies in the Caribbean. While the study primarily focused on repeated and severe flooding, its insights also have relevance for addressing multiple hazards and broader disaster risks preparation of social workers in communities in Trinidad and Tobago may face.

A strong case has been made out for social workers to be more fully integrated into building disaster resilience in communities since the profession focuses on alleviating social issues affecting individual, families, groups and communities and addressing issues of disparities when addressing disasters. The findings support recommendations for greater integration of social workers in disaster preparation, policy design and the practical implementation of resilience strategies in the Caribbean. This study strongly advocates for social workers to engage in critical community resilience praxis and calls for future research to explore the imperatives for building more participatory, critical, and nuanced understandings of resilience in disaster-affected communities.

The gaps in understanding the potential and real contributions social workers can make in building disaster resilience and reducing risks and vulnerabilities has been highlighted. There is a need for advocacy by social workers in environmental social work, environmental justice and disaster management. Integrating disaster management concepts and values of social justice in the disaster work will expand praxis in ways that integrate critical praxis into their work in communities.

This study also underscores the urgent need for social work education to prioritize equipping practitioners with the skills, knowledge, and commitment to actively build community resilience, lead in disaster mitigation and preparedness, and advance the profession's core ideals of social justice by advocating for and working alongside marginalized and vulnerable communities. The world is facing unparalleled levels of social and environmental crises brought about by climate change and intensified by inequality. These crises are interconnected and solicit transformative action towards building resilience. Social Workers are called upon to promote partnerships and practices that build the sustainability of communities. This study shows the need for the profession of social work to take key actions in the struggle to co-design a new eco social world.

AI-Assistance Disclosure

No AI tools were used.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest

Data Availability

Data will be made available on reasonable request

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