

# Conference Examines Ways to Rebuild After Disasters

By Muna Killingback

Agnes was one of the success stories. A child soldier in Sierra Leone, Agnes was reintegrated into the community and completed a master's degree in law. Despite heavy stigma suffered by returning child soldiers, her father took the lead in accepting her back with the words: "Agnes, you are my daughter, and will be forever." Her mother, and then her community, soon welcomed her.

Stigma and medical and psychosocial problems endured by child soldiers in Colombia, Nepal, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, and ways to reintegrate the soldiers back into civilian life were among the many topics discussed at the Conference on Rebuilding Sustainable Communities for Children and Their Families After Disasters, held by UMass Boston from November 16 through 19. Bringing together scholars and field practitioners from universities, governmental agencies, and non-governmental organizations, participants identified current challenges to rebuilding sustainable communities after disasters, and shared a wide range of analyses and practical solutions based on research and best practices.

The conference was the inaugural event of the new Center for Rebuilding Sustainable Communities after Disasters, part of the John W. McCormack Graduate School of Policy Studies.

Both the conference and the new Center are multidisciplinary, and go beyond traditional thinking about disaster recovery. Conference chair and Center founder and director Adenrele Awotona explained, "Disaster is painful but also presents an opportunity for innovative solutions to problems that were there before, such as lack of participation in the political process, lack of development, poverty, and gender inequality. Planning for reconstruction must be comprehensive and holistic—taking everything into consideration. Otherwise, it won't be sustainable."

Professor Awotona, former dean of the College of Public and Community Service, conceived of the idea for a permanent center following the success of a 2007 conference on Rebuilding Sustainable Communities in Iraq. Recognizing that many types of disasters were ravaging communities in all parts of the world, Professor Awotona envisioned the UMass Boston center as a repository for "policy recommendations, best practices, and technical expertise" that could assist local and national governments or international agencies. Along with natural disasters such as tsunamis and hurricanes, the Center defines disasters broadly to include bad governance, poverty, HIV and AIDS, and conflicts.

Professor Awotona emphasizes that another key goal of the Center is to enrich the experience of UMass Boston students. Several undergraduate honors students were already active at the conference, presenting their research on the impact and aftermath of the May 2008 earthquake in the Eastern Sichuan province of China, which they conducted as part of sociology professor Stephanie Hartwell's course on Environmental Justice and Human Disasters.

The need to honor and respect the dignity of disaster victims was a recurring conference theme. Fitchburg State College associate professor Diana Suskind asked participants to reflect on "how we can be more respectful of the people we care for." In contrast to a belief that "recipients of help should be happy with what they get," social scientist Dr. Evelin G.Lindner called for "The spirit of human rights, with an emphasis on human dignity," to be "mainstreamed into disaster management."

Several researchers looked at specific gender dimensions of disasters. Consultant Alisa Klein presented recommendations for preventing and responding to sexual violence. Grace Oyebola Adetula, an international expert affiliated with the Center, called for more attention to the "special needs and vulnerabilities of girls in armed conflict." UMass Boston professor and Center affiliate Asgedet Stefanos discussed how some advances gained by women through their contributions in Eritrea's war of liberation were lost once the struggle was over.

Several conference presenters described ways to educate and involve children so they are better prepared and less fearful in disasters. In disaster-prone areas, effective empowerment techniques included a child-centered participatory approach to community development and the use of video allowing youth to re-imagine their own narratives.

Another key recommendation was increasing overall community preparedness. “Our challenge is to transform vulnerability into capacity,” said Xavier Castellanos of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. “Get human beings to recognize they can do something.”

Speakers from the fields of psychology and sociology spoke about post-traumatic stress disorder and other psychological responses to disaster such as depression and anxiety. Yale University professor emeritus Kai Erickson noted, “People who believe that a disaster was man-made have much more difficulty recovering than victims of natural disasters.”

It is often the case that communities suffering from chronic problems such as poverty and underdevelopment are the most susceptible to disasters. Angela Devlen, president of Mahila Partnership, a grassroots women’s organization that co-sponsored the conference, observed, “Those most affected by disasters are disproportionately those who are most vulnerable: the poor, the disabled, women, and children.”

Sociologists view causes of disasters as not only how the disaster’s physical effects, but “more importantly, the factors that affect people’s vulnerability: physical proximity, race, ethnicity gender, age, knowledge, social and cultural capital, and government action,” observed Russell K. Schutt, a UMass Boston sociology professor and Center affiliate.

Disasters also brought out individual heroism and compassion, noted many. Keynote speaker Mark Sloan, Director of Community Emergency Response in Harris County, Texas, described how the voluntarism of thousands of ordinary citizens enabled the Houston Astrodome to become a temporary city able to house 25,000 displaced victims of Hurricane Katrina. He also noted, “In 95 percent of emergencies, bystanders or victims themselves are the first to provide emergency assistance or to perform a rescue.” Professor Erickson observed that in contrast to many news reports in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, an informal rescue system revealed “stunning courage and compassion.”

Specific dimensions of sustainability were also discussed, including renewable energy sources, food security, and green building. UMass Boston adjunct professor and Center affiliate Michael F. Donlan pointed out that “energy unsustainability is a self-caused disaster that compounds other disasters.” Researcher Heather Marsh described how the town of Greensburg, Kansas, was given new life following a tornado when it rebuilt itself “green.” Unsustainable Western-style diets that include a large amount of meat were negatively impacting food security on the planet, noted Jennifer Janisch Clifford, a natural resource economist consultant who teaches development at UMass Boston.

Placing the conference goals in a larger framework, Interim Provost Winston Langley welcomed all “to the common tasks of caring and building, and to the joint effort of nurturing solidarity.” He reflected that the 1924 Declaration of Geneva, with its call for nurturing children and families, “was recognition that untended traumatized children are not the human ingredients out of which future peace and security are born.”

The new Center is also an important new component of the McCormack School.

“McCormack has always aspired to take its work as an urban institution to a global scale. We have a specialty in state and local government work but always wanted to expand that to the global level,” said McCormack School dean Steve Crosby. “Adenrele Awotona’s interests, broad vision, and extensive contacts give us credibility in the global policy world. This initiative is compatible with the McCormack School’s Moakley Chair of Peace and Reconciliation and the Center for Democracy and Development. We’re starting to build a nice foothold in the global policy environment.”

The next steps for the Center include increasing NGO partnering, joint research, consultancies, concrete projects, and a resident scholars program. The Center’s next conference, in July 2010, will focus on rebuilding sustainable communities for the elderly and persons with disabilities.