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## Women of the River: Grassroots Organizing and Natural Disaster

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**WOMEN OF THE RIVER: GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING AND  
NATURAL DISASTER\***

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ABSTRACT

This study, a sub-study of a larger project, the Missouri Mobile Home Estates Project, examines the grassroots efforts of three women in an impoverished Midwestern river community to improve the lives of the children living there. The women's efforts included infrastructure improvements, a summer meal program for the children, a food bank, and a thrift shop. This community was devastated by floods in 1973, 1986, and 1993; at these times, crisis intervention services were provided to the residents. Yet, it appears little assistance was offered to the community between these floods, despite the community's well-publicized crime and poverty. Using a social action framework and interpretive phenomenological analysis, the participants in this study were interviewed to examine the following questions: (1) Are the characteristics of grassroots community organizing evident in the grassroots efforts of the women of the river?; (2) How did residing in Missouri Mobile affect the women long term?; (3) How did residing in Missouri Mobile affect their two children?; and (4) What common themes emerged from the women's and children's interviews?

This study examines the grassroots activities of three women in an isolated rural mobile home community devastated by floods in 1973 and 1986, and finally destroyed by a flood in 1993. Missouri Mobile Home Estates was a small community of approximately 600 people, or 250 mobile home units, situated adjacent to the Missouri River in St. Charles County, Missouri (Steinberg 2000:108). The Missouri Mobile Home Estates community in particular became notorious in the late 1980s and early 1990s for their poverty, crime, and trailer fires (Dummit 1992; Riley 1990).

Despite the poor living conditions, or perhaps because of them, three female residents became involved in grassroots efforts, mobilizing and organizing around issues such as infrastructure problems, community poverty, and child hunger. Their

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primary goal was to improve the lives of the children living in the community (C. Fox, personal communication, June 3, 2011; S. Shoemake, personal communication, May 27, 2011). These women were not widely assisted in their efforts, although their labors were publicized by the local media (M. Mahan, personal communication June 21, 2012). Crisis intervention occurred after the 1973 and 1986 floods that nearly destroyed the community. Those efforts extended to include relocation assistance after the flood of 1993 destroyed the community and the properties were purchased by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), because of their location within a flood plain (M. Mahan, personal communication June 21, 2012). Despite the work of these women to improve the lives of their disaster-prone community, the area was defined by chronic daily neglect due to the prevalent poverty and crime (Wisner and Gaillard 2009).

These women's grassroots efforts may be defined as coping strategies to deal with the inevitable flooding, as well as the unyielding poverty pressing down on the community (Burton, Kates, and White 1993; Wisner et al. 2004). Burton et al. (1993:121) have called this pattern of behavior "crossing the threshold into action," while Wisner et al. (2004:116) have called such efforts "impact-minimizing strategies," in which inhabitants attempt to minimize costs and facilitate recovery.

We begin this paper with a review of the literature. Within the literature review, we first present the historical context of the mobile home community, and the flooding that affected the lives of its residents and the structure of the community. The idea of natural disasters being socially constructed is also foregrounded here (Enarson 2012; Wisner et al. 2004). The work of Ted Steinberg (2000) is used to situate this historical context. A discussion of the woman-centered model of community organizing is provided within the literature review along with the characteristics of social action, locality development, and empowerment. The effects of vulnerability and natural disaster are also explored, both overall and within this community. We next describe the methodology we used to conduct this investigation. Then, in the results section, interviews with the women are examined to better understand the chronology of their grassroots efforts. Themes that emerge from the interviews with the children of these women and the women themselves are also examined. Finally, the implications of the study are discussed.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Historical Context*

This study was inspired in part by *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America*, by Ted Steinberg (2000). Steinberg's work used Missouri

Mobile as a case study to help explain the social and economic forces that contribute to the devastation of natural disasters. In that particular case study, Steinberg focused on the Missouri Mobile community near the confluence of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. Steinberg examined the federal, state, and local influences that contributed to the maintenance of this poor community in an infamous floodplain. Steinberg also analyzed the battles between farmers and mobile home residents over the National Flood Insurance Act of 1968. The historical context that follows interlaces the issues examined by Steinberg (2000) and incorporates archival and interview data collected for this current study.

Missouri Mobile Home Estates was platted in the mid-1950s in an area known as “frog town” (Ehlmann 2011:473). According to Steinberg (2000) and Wilkins (1996), St. Charles County planners wanted to build subdivisions and mobile home courts before zoning laws prevented such structures from being located in a flood plain. The mobile homes’ pads and plots were individually owned (Steinberg 2000:). The first owners in this community were mostly white, working-class, single families from southern Missouri and Arkansas (S. Ehlmann, personal communication, July 3, 2012). According to St. Charles County Executive Steve Ehlmann (2011):

A publication by the Chamber of Commerce in 1947 boasted that, in St. Charles, “the lawns are well kept.” However, many of the new arrivals from Southern Missouri and Arkansas took up residence in the area of St. Charles that had become known as “frog town.” The “scrubby Dutch” did not applaud the reappearance of the “southern Man.” Like other generations of German-Americans, they looked down on these poor whites from the south [*sic*], who did not spend a lot of time on lawn care and home maintenance, as rootless and lazy. (P. 472-473)

This “outsider” status haunted the community until its demise in 1993 (T. Shoemake, personal communication, June 3, 2011). It was inferred by the first author (Morton) and Bradbury (1999) that this mobile home park location may have been chosen because it was directly east of McDonnell Douglas, an aerospace manufacturer and defense contractor. McDonnell Douglas ran advertisements in the *St. Charles Suburban Journal*, desperately seeking housing due to increased employment openings in 1956. These same employment opportunities would logically lure people from the South to St. Charles County. After the 1973 flood, McDonnell Douglas allowed many mobile homes to be moved to higher ground on

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the company's property (T. Shoemake, personal communication, June 3, 2011). However, after the 1986 flood, most McDonnell Douglas employees fled the mobile home community (Bradbury 1999).

Steinberg (2000) stated that in 1967, farmers near the mobile home community established the North County Levee District and built an 8.5-mile levee. The levee was a stopgap measure to help protect the farmers' land and by default the mobile homes. However, the levee did not deter flooding for long. If anything, the levees in the area increased flooding and damage in the future 1973 flood by retaining and rerouting water (Steinberg 2000; Wisner et al. 2004).

In 1968, Congress passed the National Flood Insurance Act, which "federally subsidized flood insurance to residents in areas prone to inundation as long as communities themselves adopted laws regulating land use on the floodplains" (FEMA 1997; Steinberg 2000:103). The flood insurance was popular among St. Charles County's poor and working class, such as the Missouri Mobile residents, but the farmers expressed disdain, claiming that it compromised their right to private property (Steinberg 2000). Steve Ehlmann and other St. Charles County officials contended that some residents, such as Missouri Mobile home owners, became financially dependent on this subsidized flood insurance and made multiple claims. Despite paying into the subsidized flood insurance at the same rate as the mobile home residents, some officials felt that the farmers did not benefit from the insurance to the same degree as the mobile home owners, who clearly filed more claims than the farmers (S. Ehlmann, personal communication, July 3, 2012; Ehlmann 1998). This inequitable distribution of insurance money increased the contentiousness between the mobile home residents and the nearby farmers.

After the 1973 flood, the composition of Missouri Mobile Home Estates residents began to change from working class to more working poor with an increasing number of low-income residents (C. Fox, personal communication, June 3, 2011). After that flood and the departure of long-term residents fearful of future floods, investors began purchasing the mobile home properties as rental properties. By the early 1980s, poorer residents were renting properties, sometimes paying with Section 8 vouchers (federal government-authorized rent assistance available to low-income households). However, most of the properties were still well-maintained by individual owners as well as renters during this time (Dummit 1992).

By the 1980s, the flood insurance act subsidized the poor residents directly and indirectly – directly to those who owned their home and land and indirectly to those who were renters, living in cheap, flood-prone property. The absentee landlords benefitted from the flood insurance, which kept their low-income renters in place.

Because the absentee landlords were the home owners, they paid for the insurance and then moved in low-income renters. The flood insurance forced residents to live in floodways and helped keep them there — “on the margins, on the cheapest, riskiest, and most flood-prone land” (Steinberg 2000:105). According to Steinberg (2000), Missouri Mobile was one of the worst places in the county to live. “It was third world living,” stated Steinberg (2000:108). It flooded so often that the Army Corps of Engineers restricted any new building in that location. For many residents, flood insurance sustained the few material possessions they had managed to accumulate (Steinberg 2000). In one instance, a St. Charles County resident had filed 25 claims between 1979 (when flood insurance was first purchased) and 1993. For a yearly insurance premium, property owners in the flood plain could file as often as their property flooded (Linsalata and Best 1993). To make matters more unhealthy and hazardous, each mobile home had its own septic tank system rather than being part of the county’s underground waste water system; the septic systems required maintenance and were susceptible to leakage. Absentee landlords reportedly did not always service the tenants’ septic tanks in a timely manner, causing sewage to overflow into the yards and streets (Mueller 1989). Furthermore, the culverts were unable to contain the water from heavy rains because they were built before zoning requirements, resulting in standing water in the streets. In the mobile home park, standing water of a depth up to ten inches was observed on Rosewood Drive (Steinberg 2000). Besides restricting mail delivery and making roads impassable, these overflowing culverts became unsafe playgrounds for the mobile home park’s children and youth (T. Shoemake, personal communication, June 3, 2011; Bower 1988).

After the 1986 flood, many remaining individual owners sold their properties at below-market value because of the ongoing flooding problem (C. Fox, personal communication, June 3, 2011). Some individuals who purchased the trailer homes as rental properties were called “slumlords.” The subsequent increase in low-income residents was dramatic as was the increase in crime, trailer fires, drug use, and drug trafficking within the mobile home community (Dummit 1992).

By 1986, St. Charles County had a legendary flood history of 28 floods in 35 years (Steinberg 2000). After the flood of 1986, FEMA urged St. Charles County to elevate mobile homes out of danger, but no regulation was passed. Instead, a policy was implemented, stating that if a mobile home was more than 50 percent damaged, it could not be repaired unless it was elevated to one foot above the 100-year flood level (Linsalata and Best 1993). To meet this requirement, the mobile homes in Missouri Mobile would have had to be raised seven to nine feet, an

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impossible feat (Steinberg 2000). Many Missouri Mobile residents advocated for moving the park to higher, drier land, but this was also opposed by middle-class residents living on higher ground (Steinberg 2000). Eventually, the National Manufactured Housing Federation pressured Congress to suspend the elevation and 50 percent rule. FEMA relented and instead required that new mobile homes put on the site be elevated three feet, which failed to raise them above the 100-year flood level. Furthermore, the new regulation required that mobile homes be secured on reinforced piers, which made removal of mobile homes during floods even more challenging (Steinberg 2000).

Missouri Mobile Home Estates was destroyed by the 1993 flood. As with many rural communities devastated by natural disasters, this community was on the periphery of the media's attention (Flint and Brennan 2007). The Salvation Army and the American Red Cross assisted with emergency shelter services and vouchers for temporary housing, as they had in 1973 and 1986. According to Steinberg (2000), few St. Charles County officials were saddened by the departure of the Missouri Mobile residents, and the officials freely admitted to ignorance of what happened to the residents after they left Missouri Mobile. What is known is that FEMA implemented the buyout, yet no alternative housing project could be located in St. Charles County for the owners or for the renters (Steinberg 2000). Residents were assisted in relocation, primarily outside the St. Charles County area (Steinberg 2000). Miriam Mahan—Executive Director of St. Joachim and Ann Care Services, the agency that assisted with the relocation—stated that what happened to these residents after the flood of 1993 succeeded “in what we call blocking the pursuit of happiness” (Steinberg 2000:113). However, it appears that no one bothered asking the residents if relocation improved their lives compared with living in Missouri Mobile (Anderson and Platt 1999; Myers and White 1994). The current whereabouts of these residents was unknown until this study. The intangible, indirect losses for many of these residents included more than their homes; they lost their community (Tobin and Montz 1994). Steinberg (2000:108) shared a quotation from a Missouri Mobile resident, stating: “We feel we are a forgotten community...” (see also Bower, 1988).

*Woman-centered Components of Community Organizing*

In this section, we examine the components of woman-centered community organizing. This is important to understand before analyzing the work of the women of the river depicted herein. The women in this study believed that their grassroots activities were motivated by a desire to benefit the children of the

community (C. Fox, personal communication, June 3, 2011; S. Shoemake, personal communication, May 27, 2011). Protection and well-being of children in the community is a common motivator for action among low-income women living in conditions conducive for natural disaster (Brown and Ferguson 1995).

According to Enarson (2012), women are affected by disaster differently than are men. Disaster has a social ramification. Understanding gender-specific experiences with respect to natural disasters and how women react to and participate in disaster is important. Enarson used a feminist lens to examine women's responses to natural disasters and presented a focused discussion of gender as a social institution. Enarson found that, while women are more vulnerable to natural disaster, they are also resilient. Alston and Whittenbury (2013) have also offered a global perspective on women and disaster. Although women are often viewed as victims when discussed in disaster literature, Miller (2012) and David and Enarson (2012) examined women as the catalysts for change—before, during, and after disasters. This is consistent with our view of the women of the river examined herein.

Living in an area with a shared problem, such as flooding, often makes women feel united; this can initiate grassroots efforts (Brown and Ferguson 1995; Litt 2008). This feeling of connectedness bolsters a belief in actions that are morally right and encourages responses to a real threat (Brown and Ferguson 1995).

A “politics of mothering” is often the root of activism. Women nearly always use their maternal identities in public relations to gain attention for issues. Motherhood is an extremely powerful image that can be used to great advantage in women's grassroots efforts (Brown and Ferguson 1995). Finally, women gain knowledge and authority through their grassroots efforts. This gain of knowledge and authority is strongly determined by their gender and social class (Brown and Ferguson 1995).

Understanding the woman-centered components of community organizing is important because those components ground this study. The women in the study were deliberate in their actions and saw their work as a way to improve their community for its children. Next, we look at the characteristics of grassroots community organizing.

#### *Characteristics of Grassroots Community Organizing*

This study overlays the characteristics of grassroots community organizing put forth by Pilisuk, McAllister, and Rothman (1996) and will use these characteristics in an analysis of the grassroots work by the women of Missouri Mobile Home

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Estates. These characteristics are social action, locality development, and empowerment.

Social action focuses on direct action and is aimed at organizing a marginalized people to take action on their own behalf (Fisher and Kling 1991 ). According to Alinsky (1962), the goal is to increase involvement through the clear identification of the adversary and a focus on attainable goals. He suggested that people organize because they are subjected to social injustices and have no other option but to mobilize and create change.

Locality development examines the slower process of creating a network of continuing relationships so that community members can come together, be supportive, share resources, and experience a sense of belonging. This requires certain skills and resources. However, a lack of capacity building can cause organizing efforts to fail (Garkovitch 1989).

Empowerment is the ability “to increase one’s capacity to define, analyze, and act upon one’s problems. “Empower” is a reflexive verb; groups and individuals can only empower themselves” (Labonte 1989:87). For empowerment to happen there must be a belief that people have a right, even if they are oppressed, to express themselves. Then empowerment can lead to the reconstruction of social reality and a feeling of entitlement to social justice (Pilisuk et al. 1996). As successful action leads to a desired change, the original needs lessen, but the organizational skills and empowerment linger, which encourages work toward new or more extensive goals for social change (Brown 1991; Pilisuk et al. 1996).

*Components of Vulnerability*

Focusing on vulnerability in natural disaster is common (e.g., White, Kates, and Burton 2001; Wisner et al. 2004). There are typically three major uses of the term vulnerability in reference to disasters: being prone to or susceptible to injury or damage; a measure of risk combined with the level of economic or social ability to cope with the resulting disaster event; and the characteristics of a person or group in terms of their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist, and recover from the impact of a disaster (White et al. 2001).

Fischender, Karasin, and Rubin (2012) described in more detail the components of vulnerability that can be applied to communities in areas prone to natural disaster. This understanding of the components of vulnerability is especially useful in examining communities in which natural disasters may be attributed to social and economic forces (Steinberg 2000). There are three dimensions of a system that make it vulnerable: exposure, outcomes, and characteristics of the system. This framework allows us to better understand the vulnerability of Missouri Mobile and

how the women of the river fit into the framework. What follows is a description of the main components of vulnerability and how they relate to the Missouri Mobile community.

Exposure is the degree to which a system experiences environmental or sociopolitical stress. These stressors are described in terms of magnitude, frequency, duration, and the extent of the hazard (Burton et al. 1993). The 1973, 1986, and 1993 floods of Missouri Mobile would be considered stressors to the community. Additionally, the high poverty and crime rates within the community would be considered environmental stressors that weakened the community structure of Missouri Mobile.

The characteristics of the system that make it vulnerable represent the “nature of the system that causes it to be sensitive or vulnerable. Thus vulnerability can be identified through a set of attributes of a system that contain certain outcomes” (Fischender et al. 2012:19). Included within the characteristics of a system are sensitivity and adaptive capacity. Sensitivity is the system’s proneness to influence or the degree to which a system changes due to disturbances (Lewis 1999). The increasing poverty and decreasing mobile home ownership are examples of sensitivity in Missouri Mobile. Adaptive capacity is the ability of a system to evolve to accommodate environmental hazards or policy changes and to expand the range of variability to cope (Fischender et al. 2012). Examples of adaptive capacity within Missouri Mobile included the grassroots work of the women of the river as well as the crime and drug use that became rampant as poverty increased. The women could affect variables, like hunger, but they could not affect variables, like relocation of the community from the flood plain. These adaptive changes were components of a coping mechanism used by the community. Adaptive capacity components are not always positive (for example, crime and drug use) but become factors in some communities hit by social and economic hardship. FEMA was also an adaptive capacity component because their policies affected the community.

The outcomes dimension of vulnerability is the loss from a potentially damaging disturbance (Cutter, Boruff, and Shirley 2003). In this context, resources include monetary wealth, property rights, and other legal rights as well as social resources such as information, cultural knowledge, and practical expertise (Fischender et al. 2012). For the Missouri Mobile community, the outcomes included increasing poverty after each flood, increasing FEMA involvement, state and local government involvement, and the eventual destruction of the community.

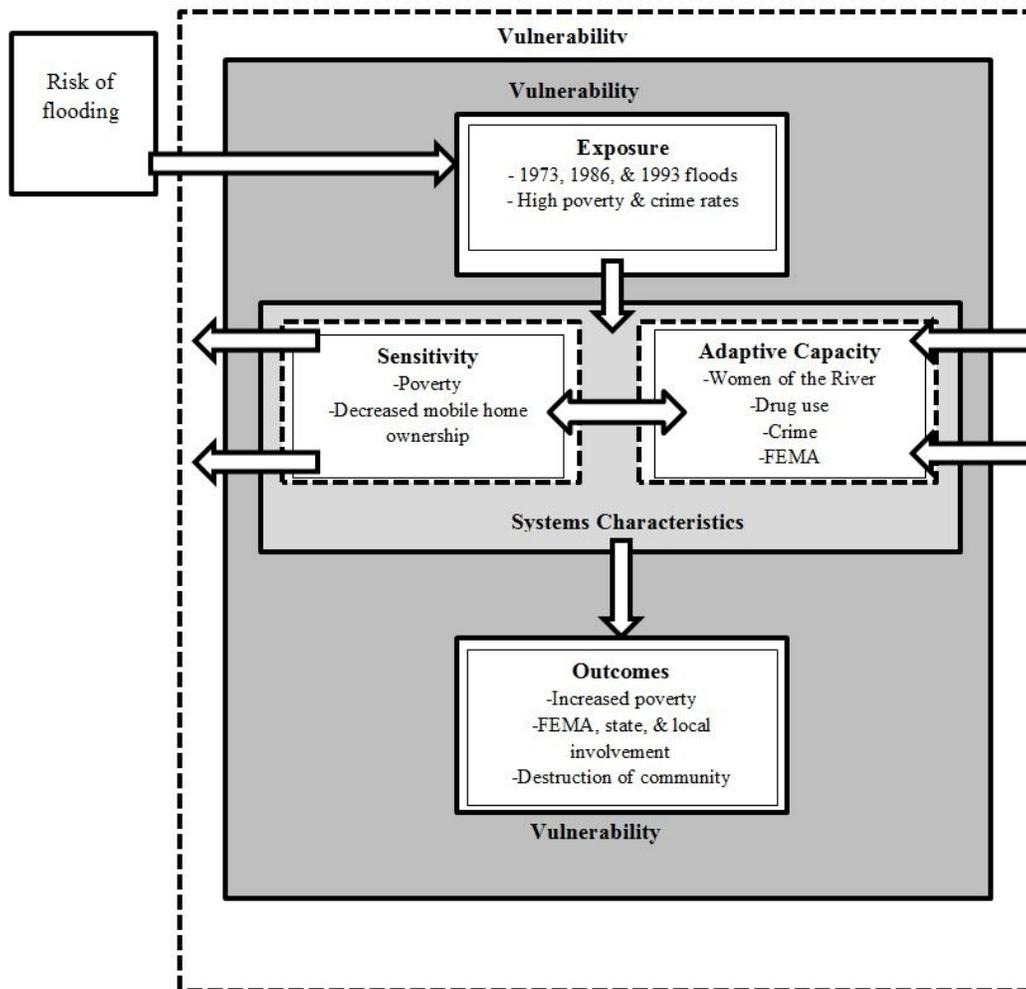


FIGURE 1. MODEL OF THE COMPONENTS OF VULNERABILITY IN THE MISSOURI MOBILE COMMUNITY

The Model of Vulnerability as it relates to Missouri Mobile is displayed in Figure 1. This model illustrates the significant role of both poverty and FEMA, and state and local government involvement in the outcomes. This model is consistent with Steinberg's (2000) analysis of the community and the significant role that poverty played in policies that kept the people of Missouri Mobile entrenched in a community doomed for destruction by flooding. It also situates the women of the river firmly within the adaptive capacity of the community.

*Research Questions*

This study attempts to answer the following questions: (1) Are the characteristics of grassroots community organizing (social action, locality development, and empowerment) evident in the grassroots efforts of the women of the river?; (2) How did residing in Missouri Mobile affect the women long term?; (3) How did residing in Missouri Mobile affect their two children?; and (4) What common themes emerged from the women's and children's interviews?

## METHODS

This study is part of a larger project examining the Missouri River community of Missouri Mobile Home Estates. The larger project adopted a mixed methods approach, using the Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Checklist and the Resiliency Scale to examine PTSD and resiliency among community members of Missouri Mobile, as well as semi-structured qualitative interviews to examine their lives while in Missouri Mobile. Interviewing the women who were the grassroots social change agents and their now adult children was a shared goal of the larger project and the study described here. The information regarding PTSD and resiliency is not included in the results presented here.

*Participants*

Three women were identified through archival research of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*; the *St. Charles Post*; the *St. Louis Globe Democrat*; the *St. Charles Suburban Journal*; other local periodicals; and Ted Steinberg's book, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America*. These particular women's names and grassroots activities were widely reported in the local newspapers. This piqued the interest of the first author of this study, who then attempted to contact the women. From the archival research, three women—Cindy Fox, Vanessa Smith, and Sherry Shoemake—were identified as possible participants in this sub-study. Two of the women were contacted by the first author via a letter of invitation, and they agreed to be interviewed. Among the list of potential research participants, Vanessa Smith was unable to be located for interviewing. According to public records, Smith had moved from Missouri Mobile just before the flood of 1993. Archived newspaper articles and Steinberg's case study included interviews with and quotes from Vanessa Smith, which were used for the analysis in this study. The children of Cindy Fox and Sherry Shoemake were also interviewed. Pseudonyms were used for Vanessa Smith, Cindy Fox, and Fox's daughter. Sherry Shoemake and her son, Terry, chose to have their real names used, and signed a release to that effect.

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Seven St. Charles City and County officials were also interviewed for their perspectives on Missouri Mobile Home Estates. Included in this group were the County Executive, Director of Zoning and Planning, Crime Analyst, Director of Parks and Recreation, and a police official. These interviews were not audiotaped, but notes were taken and the interviews were summarized in transcript form. The Executive Director of a nonprofit agency that provided individualized social services to the Missouri Mobile community was also interviewed.

*Research Frameworks*

The two theoretical frameworks used for this study were the social action framework and an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). The Social action framework was outlined by Emmet (1958) and Nadel (1963), but clearly originates from the work of Weber (in Mercer 1972). This framework posits that each person is born “into a particular objective situation.” Each person then constructs and internalizes his or her subjective definition of reality. Definitions of the situation account for attitudes, which name and motivate behavior (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Foote 1951; Mercer 1972).

IPA aims to explore in detail how participants interpret their private and social worlds. The main factors of an IPA study are the meanings that particular experiences and events hold for study participants (Smith and Osborn 2003). In this type of study, the researcher strives to gain an understanding of phenomena of which the research participant is not always aware, and may uncover shared experience between the researcher and the research participant. The participants are considered the experts of their lived experience. Researchers interpret the interviews using a subjective and reflective process as they enter the process (Reid, Flowers, and Larkin 2005; Smith and Osborn 2003).

*Procedures*

Mrs. Shoemake’s and her son’s interviews were conducted separately and in-person at her son’s home. Mrs. Fox’s and her daughter’s interviews were conducted separately and by phone. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. A semi-structured interview was employed because it offers flexibility to approach different participants (i.e., the women and the children) in diverse ways while still covering similar areas of data collection (e.g., emergent themes regarding how life in Missouri Mobile affected their lives) (Noor 2008; Smith and Osborn 2003). All the interviews were conducted by the first author who has experience in semi-structured interviewing. The interviews generally lasted one and a half to two

hours. The participants consented to audiotaping of the interviews; the audiotapes were then transcribed. The interview combined a pre-established range of theoretically informed questions with flexibility in prompts permitting the discovery of new and emerging information (Smith and Osborn 2003). Examples of interview questions are:

- What are some of the good memories you have about living in the mobile home park?
- What are some of the challenges you faced there or what are some of the bad memories?
- Did you help the community work on issues while you lived there? For instance, did you rally around issues like the drainage ditches or sign petitions? [Prompt: Go into detail with those who appeared to be community mobilizers. Have they been involved in community mobilization since leaving the park?]

Therefore, the interview process remained focused but encouraged the exploration of new, unique, or unforeseen experiences of the participants. This is consistent with both the social action framework and IPA.

The IPA process included two researchers using thematic coding for each of the four cases, following the procedures of Chapman and Smith (2002). The data from the audiotapes were transcribed and then compared with the audiotape recordings to ensure accuracy. The interviews of the two women of Missouri Mobile and their two children were analyzed separately and then compared for common emergent themes. The a priori themes of social action, locality development, and empowerment were identified in the portion of the interviews where Fox and Shoemake talk about their grassroots efforts. The archival articles involving Vanessa Smith were analyzed to ensure that her community participation was acknowledged. Content analysis using the social action framework was performed on the Fox and Shoemake transcripts; on the archival data from Smith; on the children's transcripts; and on the themes of social action, locality development, and empowerment in the grassroots efforts of the women. Emergent themes were analyzed using IPA. To ensure the accuracy of the analysis and of this article, a draft of this manuscript was sent to the participants for their review. They were encouraged to bring up any issues that were not covered in the manuscript. The human subjects and study procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board of Western New Mexico University before beginning the study.

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RESULTS

This section examines the grassroots activities of the women of the river (the key actors). Then, the emerging themes of the effect of living in Missouri Mobile on the lives of these women and their children are explored, as well as the common themes between the women and the children. This section examines the results as follows. We first present a chronological description of the major grassroots efforts that took place at Missouri Mobile Home Estates, including: the fight to have the standing water removed from Rosewood Drive; efforts related to Sunshine Camp, the food bank, the thrift shop; and the organization around the themes of social action, locality development, and empowerment. Next, we identify common themes emerging from the interviews of the women and children regarding the impact of living in Missouri Mobile.

*Grassroots Efforts and Themes of Social Action, Locality Development, and Empowerment*

*Standing water on Rosewood Drive.* Fox, Shoemake, and Smith first took the Gas Company to task after the flood of 1986 caused the mobile homes' gas lines to fill with water, which later caused pipes to freeze and burst. The women went door-to-door collecting neighbors' accounts of problems they were having with the gas company. The gas company finally became interested in rectifying the problem when Mrs. Fox took the neighbors' stories to the Public Safety Commission in Jefferson City, Missouri. In 1987, the gas company reimbursed the residents for their frozen pipes and damages (C. Fox, personal communication, June 3, 2011). This success led to increased agency among the women.

The success with the gas company prompted the women to tackle the ongoing problem of standing water on Rosewood Drive. Interestingly, Fox, Shoemake, Smith, and their families resided on Rosewood Drive where the standing water level would sometimes reach up to ten inches. The mobile home park had no storm water drainage system because it was built before zoning regulations were established (Steinberg 2000). According to Paul Saunders, of the State Health Department: "Any time it rains for a number of hours or the river is high, this area is going to have problems" (Bower 1988:1).

Vanessa Smith, frustrated by St. Charles County's inattention to the problem, told a reporter in 1988, "We feel like we are a forgotten community. Our children have to walk through this water to catch the school bus. You can't walk to your neighbor's house. The cars get stuck. They don't deliver the mail some days" (Bower 1988:1).

Due to the media attention generated by these women of Missouri Mobile, St. Charles County highway crews dug ditches along the streets in the park, but this approach did not solve the problem with the standing water (Tipton 1988). A year later, after seven weeks of standing water on Rosewood Drive, Mrs. Shoemake strategically called in a reporter from the *St. Charles Suburban Journal* (Mueller 1989). The reporter wrote, “The amount of standing water in the streets in incredible. During a visit to Shoemake’s house last week, this reporter sank to his knees in freezing water just trying to walk from his car to her door” (Mueller 1989). To gain relief, the women also circulated petitions that they mailed to government agencies (Mueller 1989).

Finally, the negative media attention initiated action by St. Charles County. St. Charles County maintenance workers came down with a backhoe to clean out the culverts on and around Rosewood Drive. According to Mrs. Fox, “After the fight, they gave us a key to the flood gate, so we could open it when our street flooded—so it could drain past the levee. Now, of course, when it floods, the first thing we would have to do is keep [the flood gate] closed.” Although this was not the safest of solutions, it did ease the standing water problem that threatened the children of the community.

Social action was evident among the women of Missouri Mobile Home Estates. They organized around the standing water problem, not because it was a nuisance, but because their children had to walk in this potentially hazardous water. Furthermore, the children played in the water. According to Terry, the son of Mrs. Shoemake, “Uh, playing in the ditches, that was one of our favorite things to do. We all rode bicycles and whenever it rained all the culverts would fill up, and we would just go and ride our bikes into the ditches. Probably not very sanitary these days, but...” This was especially true since the septic tanks overflowed regularly, and the standing water was contaminated with human waste from the overflowing septic tanks.

Locality development was present in the drainage problem on Rosewood Drive because the problem created long-lasting relationships among the women and helped make connections with the local officials. Locality development is directed internally, and Fox, Shoemake, and Smith were like-minded in their belief that their children and the children of Missouri Mobile deserved a better life. They supported each other in future endeavors to continue to better the lives of Missouri Mobile children. The mothers—aware of the unsanitary and dangerous conditions created by the standing water—used petitions, meetings with residents and St. Charles County officials, and media attention to organize. These women had the ability,

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skills, and resources to build a sense of caring in their community, whether they organized around standing water or a summer meal program for the children (Pilisuk et al. 1996). The resilience of the women should also be discussed here. They could imagine things differently and act on that imagination, which was a major resource for their community (Walker and Salt 2006).

Empowerment was also evident in the work of these women. The fight with the gas company led to working toward a solution for the standing water on Rosewood Drive. Moreover, as stated by Mrs. Shoemake, "After the success with the drainage ditches, I sat and wondered: If [the kids] have free lunches at school, where are they getting their lunch during the summer?" In this statement describing how she came to envision Sunshine Camp (the story of which follows), we can see how success empowers.

*Sunshine Camp, the food bank, and the thrift shop.* Sherry Shoemake designed, implemented, and took on the primary role of maintaining the quality of Sunshine Camp. Mrs. Shoemake stated that Sunshine Camp started as a breakfast program. After successful resolution of the standing water problem, Shoemake and other women of the community began the summer meal program that became Sunshine Camp. Sunshine Camp was implemented with the help of a nonprofit social service agency for low-income people and communities, but the residents of Missouri Mobile soon felt that the agency was cheating the residents out of their money and donations. This sentiment was noted by Mrs. Shoemake (personal communication, May 27, 2011) and Mrs. Fox (personal communication, June 3, 2011) as well as their husbands. What little extra money residents possessed went to help support Sunshine Camp and most of the work was done by Shoemake, Fox, Smith (originally acting as the program coordinator), and other volunteer neighborhood mothers (Riley 1988). These residents had little understanding of concepts like administrative costs and overhead. Eventually, the government helped with donations of several microwaves, the St. Charles Lion's Club provided the lunches, and the Missouri Mobile residents purchased the children's desserts (S. Shoemake, personal communication, May 27, 2011).

The goal of Sunshine Camp was to keep the children fed and busy throughout the long, hot, and humid summers (Riley 1988). The increasing impoverishment and crime in the community by 1988 also served as a catalyst. Besides lunch, Sunshine Camp provided activities such as visits from Fred Bird (the Cardinals baseball team's mascot), Cardinals baseball players, and the California Raisins. Eventually, free dental and health care were also provided to the children (S. Shoemake, personal communication, May 27, 2011; Riley 1988). Representatives

from the Humane Society spoke to the children about wild animals (the mobile home park was being overrun by stray animals) and the Coast Guard instructed about water safety (Riley 1988). Though the nonprofit agency initially helped with some of these activities, the women of the river went on to coordinate these events without the help of outside advocates.

The success of Sunshine Camp prompted Mrs. Shoemake to start running a food bank out of her family's mobile home; the food bank was supplied through donations. The St. Charles Lion's Club also supplied Shoemake with coats, school supplies, for Toys for Tots, a thrift shop of sorts for the impoverished children of Missouri Mobile (S. Shoemake, personal communication, May 27, 2011).

Word of Sunshine Camp, the food bank, and the thrift shop spread quickly to other poor children and parents in north St. Charles County. Sunshine Camp began with 15 children in 1988, and enrollment climbed to 90 children in 1989 (Riley 1990). Nearly 200 children attended the camp in 1992 (S. Shoemake, personal communication, May 27, 2011). By that time, camp activities had gone from being held entirely in the home and yard of Mrs. Shoemake, to having many activities being held in a nearby park. Ultimately, it was this rapid increase in children combined with Mrs. Shoemake's decision to step down from leadership that led to Sunshine Camp's demise. According to Mrs. Shoemake, the mother of thirteen children when she resigned "My husband sat me down one day and said: 'We don't even have a life of our own anymore.' He said, '24/7 our home is open to the public...and we need to take a break.'" Overwhelmed with children and without the vision of Mrs. Shoemake, the other women of Missouri Mobile struggled to keep Sunshine Camp and the other services running efficiently (S. Shoemake, personal communication, May 27, 2011). According to Mrs. Fox (personal communication, June 3, 2011), it was the flood of 1993 that put the final nail in the coffin of the much-needed services.

Social action regarding child and neighborhood hunger was directed by Mrs. Shoemake, who organized the affected residents of Missouri Mobile to take action. This can be seen in an excerpt from a poem written by Mrs. Shoemake directed at residents and potential donors early in the implementation of Sunshine Camp: "Try to imagine going to bed hungry only one night a week... and imagine a child doing it more often." As the number of children increased in Sunshine Camp, so did the number of mothers in the community who volunteered their time. Considering the significant competing needs of these women, their ability to organize was impressive.

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Locality development was evident in Sunshine Camp, the food bank, and the thrift shop; however, partnering with a nonprofit social service agency was a dismal failure. These programs profited from private donations and the generosity of the St. Charles Lion's Club in providing lunches, and the help of the government in purchasing microwaves so the children could have hot lunches. Moreover, the residents of Missouri Mobile consistently donated their time as well as money to purchase desserts for the children (S. Shoemake, personal communication, May 27, 2011). This created a web of networks, connections, and relationships that resulted in residents coming together, sharing their resources, and most important, experiencing a feeling of belonging to the Missouri Mobile community (Pilisuk et al. 1996). Though the community was high in social capital, the multitude of problems (poverty, flooding, crime, and drugs) would not allow it to overcome all the risks and vulnerabilities (Wisner et al. 2004).

Empowerment was the inevitable result of the success of Sunshine Camp, the food bank, and the thrift shop. However, the intensity of the needs of the Missouri Mobile community and the competing needs of the women involved in the programs made long-term sustainability challenging (S. Shoemake, personal communication, May 27, 2011). Past success in organizing around the standing water on Rosewood Drive led to Mrs. Shoemake's vision for Sunshine Camp and the other much-needed programs. For the women involved in Sunshine Camp, there was the perceived right to find and express their voices against child hunger. True dialogue assumes that each person has worth and has a right to social justice; here, the people were the hungry children, the oppressed residents, and the women who made the programs work (Pilisuk et al. 1996).

*Themes Emerging from the Women's and Children's Interviews*

To better understand the long-term effects of the Missouri Mobile community and of the grassroots efforts, interviews were conducted with Shoemake; Fox; Shoemake's son, Terry; and Fox' daughter, Sarah. Their memories were both positive and negative, but in retrospect, the research participants who were children during the late 1980s and early 1990s considered living at Missouri Mobile an experience they are glad to have gone through.

Sarah Fox's memories are mostly centered on her friends at Missouri Mobile. She stated, "I don't really have any bad memories, just some of the crazy stuff kids do... There was always friends around... We could go down to the river, which was in back of the trailer park, and play in the river, go fishing. I loved to fish." Sarah also remembered losing everything in the floods of both 1986 and 1993: "It was

hard. They didn't give us time to pack things up. They just evacuated us. We had to pile things up in the house and go." Terry Shoemake had many negative memories, but ultimately "...the experiences down there, I wouldn't trade them for the world. Were they all good? No, but they helped shape who I am today. Who I am today will someday help shape my children and who they will be. And I wouldn't trade those experiences for anything." In remembering Sunshine Camp and his mother's efforts to save the community, Terry stated,

When [Sunshine Camp] was there it was great. I mean, but again, before it was there—nothing; after it was gone—nothing... There was so much poverty... There wasn't a lot of people like my mother around. That's why the kids were always at my house, because their parents weren't there... My mother was definitely the rose they grew from concrete. Definitely."

This quotation emphasizes the fact that although Sunshine Camp improved the lives of the children, it was unable to sustain social change. Negative environmental factors, such as crime and drug use, were just too formidable.

To some degree, Mrs. Fox, Mrs. Shoemake, and their children had paradoxical responses in their memories of life at Missouri Mobile and how it affected them. Life there was tough, but it was rewarding as well.

Mrs. Shoemake voiced the most positive memories, and this appears to reflect her personality: "Most of our memories from there are good memories. I'm still in touch with most of our neighbors who lived close to us, and who were involved in the program. And we still get together every now and then to talk." Yet some memories did seem to haunt her:

Well, I had never realized until I moved into the trailer park that there were so many—I don't want to call them neglected children, because their families loved them and took care of them, but they just didn't have the money to make their lives plentiful. You know what I mean? And that was a sad thing. That was just—I couldn't sit back and see that happen to the kids.

Mrs. Fox was more forthcoming about the negative aspects of Missouri Mobile: "Um, God, it was known as a slum area... Some of it was justified, but a lot of it was not... But it didn't get bad until later on [after the flood of 1986]—with the druggies, but I would not hesitate to—I didn't feel no fear of walking through those

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streets, because I knew my people.” When describing whether her life had improved, stayed the same, or worsened since leaving Missouri Mobile, Mrs. Fox stated, “Some things got better, some things were worse. It was harder on the children because they were pulled away from the only world they knew. It was better because I own my own house.”

As stated earlier, Sarah’s memories were mainly good ones, centered on her neighborhood friends and her school. She did mention the composition of most families at Missouri Mobile: “Well, the families pretty much stayed the same over the years. They didn’t have much. They were single moms with three, four kids all living in the same place. The men were—a lot of them—alcoholics. They drank a lot.” Sarah struggled with leaving her friends and the only school she had known after relocating from Missouri Mobile. However, Facebook has allowed her to reunite with many friends from Missouri Mobile: “...I’ve found about 80 percent of them... So, yeah, we stay in contact.”

Terry has many similar memories:

It was so poverty-stricken. I hate to keep going back and using that term, but it was—I mean I don’t think there were more than two families that went to school and paid for their lunch. They were on the free lunch program... It was real cut-throat...there were drive-by shootings in the trailer park, people overdosing in the trailer park.”

Yet in the next breath, Terry conceded, “And again, it was very community-like, real tight-knit. At the same time, one loose string—you know what I’m saying? — would topple it all.”

Perhaps these paradoxical responses led to the resiliency of the residents interviewed. It was common for the research participants to mention the hardships they encountered while living at Missouri Mobile but also to reflect positively on the strong community relational ties—the strong social capital that existed. Those community connections ended after the flood of 1993, which may have led to some of the adjustment problems noted by the children after leaving Missouri Mobile. Mrs. Fox and her family eventually purchased their first home and moved an hour southwest to Warren County. After moving in with relatives in St. Charles County for a few months, Mrs. Shoemake and her family rented another trailer in Lincoln County, 30 miles northwest of St. Charles.

## DISCUSSION

The following discussion interprets the meaning of the analysis of the women's grassroots efforts; the themes of social action, locality development, and empowerment; and the common themes in the women's and children's interviews.

The women's grassroots efforts followed the components of women-centered organizing. The women of Missouri Mobile found creative and effective ways to deal with community problems. This was especially evident with Sunshine Camp, which brought together many community mothers, some of whom were dealing with issues like poverty and drug abuse. Even the men, often wary of engagement, supported the program. The women felt united trying to prevent child hunger. Of course, the *politics of mothering* was also evident. The women, in talking with the media, used their maternal identities to gain attention and support.

The women's grassroots efforts also demonstrated the component of adaptive capacity for resilience to vulnerability. The women demonstrated their ability through grassroots efforts to accommodate the flooding that chronically affected their lives on Rosewood Drive. Furthermore, to cope with the increasing poverty and crime affecting Missouri Mobile, the women developed and implemented Sunshine Camp. This program not only provided food for the hungry children of the community, but also offered programs on issues that threatened the community, such as stray animals and water safety.

The grassroots efforts of the women of the river showed social action, locality development, and empowerment. As demonstrated in the results, social action took place as the needs in the community became apparent: standing water on Rosewood Drive, hungry children and families, and clothing and toy needs of the children and families. Locality development was observed in the uniting of the women in their grassroots efforts as well as in Sunshine Camp's ability to unite the community. Furthermore, Sunshine Camp, the food bank, and the thrift shop allowed local organizations such as the Lion's Club to participate in these programs, despite the isolative and xenophobic tendencies of the larger community. Empowerment is seen in the women's fight with the gas company, which led to the fight over the standing water on Rosewood Drive, which led to Sunshine camp, and finally to the establishment of the food bank and the thrift shop. Each endeavor empowered the women to address additional needs in the community.

Common themes that emerged from the women's and children's interviews are paradoxical responses related to life in Missouri Mobile and to the effects the community had on them. The women's grassroots efforts were recalled with fondness by the children of the mobile home community; however, there were still

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problems that could not be overcome by the women's efforts. This suggests that, even with social capital and the presence of grassroots organizers, communities can still be susceptible to risk and vulnerability, especially with the probability of the threat of natural disaster ever present (Wisner et al. 2004). A common sentiment expressed in the interviews was that life was hard in the trailer park but it was also rewarding, and made them who they are today. Using IPA to understand how the participants were making sense of their world, it became evident that these paradoxical responses may be grounded in social constructionist theory. This is illustrated by the narrative conceptions of the participants in this study. They were especially notable in explanations of the children's negativity to the drugs, alcohol, and crime within the community since they still stated that they had "fun" in the community and that the community helped shape who they are today.

*Implications*

This study utilizes a social action framework and IPA in a small-scale project that represents a community well known for its crime and impoverishment locally, but mostly unknown to the larger community. When the Missouri Mobile community was destroyed in the flood of 1993, few others in St. Charles County were upset by the loss. However, from a strengths perspective, much good emanated from this community, including grassroots organizing by three women living in a low-income, high crime community (S. Shoemaker, personal communication, May 27, 2011; Saleebey 1996). Grassroots organizing by mothers with many competing needs demonstrates the strength of some low-income communities composed of strong individuals.

This study helps us understand that people from lower socioeconomic and educational backgrounds can make positive changes in their problematic communities. While we should not ignore the negative occurrences in this community, this study does offer a multifaceted lens through which to view a poor community and its inhabitants. Further, the women's work in this community may be used as a blueprint for other low-income communities in high risk-high hazard areas (Bullard 1990).

*Future Research*

While this study offers a retrospective snapshot into the lives of a few important community members, future research should consider a more widespread study of hidden communities prone to natural disaster. Research on a wider spectrum will allow us to determine whether grassroots activities are common in other small rural

communities. It would be important to see if men in other communities are more involved in leadership than was the case in Missouri Mobile. In addition, a future retrospective study on adults who were children from hidden, disaster-prone communities would be beneficial to understanding the long-term effects, both positive and negative, of living in such communities.

Another area for future study is how professional organizers link with isolated, high-crime communities so that more effective advocacy and intervention can take place. Although women residents in rural communities with high poverty rates often undertake community organizing activities (Brown and Ferguson 1995), it is important to appreciate that these women usually have multiple competing needs such as families, health issues, and the need to locate resources for bills and food. Women involved in grassroots efforts may have to suspend or end their community organizing activities to meet their other competing needs, as Mrs. Shoemake did. A professional community organizer—one who could support these women, help them balance their many obligations, or assist them in their community organizing responsibilities—would be beneficial.

### *Limitations*

The limitations of this study include its small size and our inability to locate Vanessa Smith. Her absence limited her voice, which would have added more depth and richness to the interviews and analysis. This community was unique in many ways. It was a small mobile home community situated a short distance from the Missouri River. Therefore, the findings are not generalizable to most small rural communities.

### CONCLUSION

Through the social action framework, this study allowed the participating women of the river to discuss their own subjective reality regarding their grassroots efforts (Mercer 1972). This social construction of reality extended to the women's and their children's accounts of how living in Missouri Mobile affected their lives (Berger and Luckmann 1967). Using IPA, the participants are considered the experts of their lived experience, and they offer an understanding of their cognitions, commitments, and feelings about their experiences of living in Missouri Mobile (Reid, Flowers, and Larkin 2005; Smith and Osborn 2003).

The women experienced their role as grassroots organizers as secondary to that of their role as mothers. Their motivation for those grassroots efforts was to improve the lives of the children in the community. The women and their children

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experienced paradoxical thoughts about Missouri Mobile. Although there were negative aspects — poverty, child hunger, crime, and the like — there were also positive components — a sense of community being the uppermost. This socially-constructed behavior is consistent with behavior that occurs in areas of natural disaster (Christenson 1984).

These participants were always aware of previous floods and the potential for flooding in their community. While it may be hard to understand how Sunshine Camp, for example, relates to catastrophic flooding, it is still relevant. The persistent flooding led to more middle- and working-class families moving away from the area. This left mostly impoverished residents, which led to problems such as child hunger and crime.

This community is a community that is firmly anchored in the annals of St. Charles County history, as evidenced in the accounts of Steinberg (2000) and Ehlmann (2011). Remembering the positive contributions of these residents and the community is also important for the legacy of Missouri Mobile Home Estates. This legacy is important because it makes visible the often invisible work of the women in response to flooding and poverty. This is a critical part of the recovery and sustainability of vulnerable, disaster-prone communities. Further, the legacy gives future generations a blueprint for community sustainability and recovery in areas affected by natural disaster and impoverishment.

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