Creating Community after Disaster: Norm Formation in Post-Hurricane Mitch Resettlements

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Norm Formation in Post-Hurricane Mitch Resettlements in Honduras

Ryan Alaniz

INTRODUCTION

Hurricane Mitch (1998), one of the most powerful in human history, devastated the small impoverished isthmus nation of Honduras, affecting nearly half the nation’s population and displacing hundreds of thousands. The Roman Catholic cardinal, Oscar Rodriguez, noted that the disaster destroyed 50 years of development efforts in just a few days. Aid flooded in at an unprecedented rate, and the Honduran president promised that the nation would “build back better.” Indeed, many Hondurans hoped that, with this aid, they could utilize this tragedy as an opportunity to address the issues of poverty and crime that plagued their country.

Unfortunately, this has not been most Hondurans’ experience (Ensor 2010). Although the nation’s infrastructure was rebuilt, larger social issues now haunt the small country. Crime is ubiquitous; corruption entangles many institutions, lowering trust in the government; and gang violence has earned the nation the title “homicide
capital of the world.” Yet, this context contrasts sharply with the experience of some Mitch-born resettlements. Despite the difficult environment, these have higher levels of social health than many nonaffected neighborhoods.

This chapter investigates mechanisms that can lead to better long-term social health outcomes for disaster resettlements by comparing two established after Hurricane Mitch. Post-disaster recovery efforts have particular challenges that are often overlooked in an effort to provide living space. This is due, in part, to post-disaster time-space compression and short-term goals mandated by resource allocation time limits (Olshansky, Hopkins, and Johnson 2012) and lack of supervision of resettlement projects (Alaniz 2012b). In addition, disaster survivors also wrestle with issues of primary and secondary trauma (Gill 2007), broken social networks (Barrios 2010), and feelings of loss of control (Erikson 1976). Resettled disaster survivors stand at the intersection of multiple challenges as they try to rebuild their lives in a different location (Jha 2010).

LITERATURE REVIEW

On the surface, a resettlement and a community appear nearly identical. Community can be defined as a group of people with similar self-interest in a bounded geographic location (Beck 2001; Calhoun 1983; Crow 2007). It is the particular group of people and similar self-interest that create the differences. Resettlements, particularly those borne from disasters, have characteristics that illustrate that it is a preliminary state to building a community. This may include any combination of the following challenges: broken social networks, living in a new and possibly unknown place, primary and secondary trauma, reliance on outside support, loss of important religious or cultural symbols, and lack of cohesion and community vision. Therefore, the particular group’s background may make the goal of collective interest more difficult, especially if survivors are heterogeneous along lines of race/ethnicity, culture, religion, politics, and other dimensions.

It is at the juncture where recovery as resettlement turns into the development of a community that mechanisms that encourage long-term social health have particular salience. Mahoney (2001, 576) defines social mechanisms as “unobserved relations or processes that generate outcomes.” Thus, the mechanisms that develop a resettlement into a community are both a process and an outcome. This is the case in the creation of common interests (social norms and community vision) that transform a collection of individuals into a connected group. Indeed, it is this social dimension that changes a resettlement into a community.

What, then, are the mechanisms through which long-term development happens in post-disaster resettlements? To address this, this chapter will begin with descriptions of the organizations and communities, followed by a discussion of data and methodology. Next, the theory of path dependency will be defined, outlining it as a framework for understanding resettlement-to-community development.

COMMUNITY AND ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

Seven communities built in the wake of the hurricane were selected for this research. Commonality in demographics, geographic location, long-term nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) relationships, and infrastructure within newly constructed
communities were sought, as well as differences in development trajectories. For parsimony, this chapter will detail two of the seven resettlements, averaging the five other communities’ data into a control group.

Ciudad Divina Providencia (Divina) and Ciudad España (España) offer strategic sites for a comparative analysis of community development. Their similarities immediately following the hurricane contrast to their dramatically different situations today. In response to Hurricane Mitch, NGOs built Divina and España to accommodate citizens from Tegucigalpa who had lost their homes. Members of each community arrived with comparable working and lower middle class socioeconomic statuses and racial homogeneity. They also came from many of the same neighborhoods affected by Mitch and had similar family sizes and culture. The resettlements had nearly identical infrastructure. Both Providencia and España were built within walking distance of one another, providing comparable geographic features.

Though initially similar in many ways, current social health conditions in each community are remarkably different. Social health characteristics have been defined as low crime, civic participation, collective efficacy, common vision, social capital, and community independence from external organizations (Alaniz 2012a). Based on these features, Divina thrives by having high trust and involvement in community activities, sustains a low crime rate, and has a clear community vision for the future. There is a general sense of safety for vulnerable populations, such as women and children. By contrast, gang problems, crime, and other social ills plague España. Homicide has been a recurring issue in España (see Table 6.1) as has corruption, low collective efficacy, and little community cohesiveness concerning vision. Two similar communities beginning anew but experiencing drastically different outcomes offer a unique opportunity for advancing our understanding of the mechanisms that shape community developmental trajectories.

The organizations that supported each resettlement played a major role in the long-term social health outcomes. Although the organizations had similar goals for the resettlements (e.g., infrastructure, material resource commitment, and support of residents over time), they took significantly different community development strategies, especially in the creation and maintenance of social structures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 6.1</th>
<th>Social Health Characteristics of Divina and España</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>How Much Do You Trust Your Neighbors? (a Lot)</strong> (%)</td>
<td>Number of Crimes per 1000 Residents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divina</td>
<td>57(^a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>España</td>
<td>38</td>
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\(^a\) Z-test significance at .01 level.
\(^b\) Below the national average.
Divina was founded by a Catholic organization, the Fundación Cristo De El Picacho (Fundación), symbolically headed by Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez of Honduras. The organization's goals were not just to relocate survivors but, rather, to create a model community and new Honduran.

To do so, they utilized three strategies: interim leadership, integration, and intervention. First, the Fundación board of directors believed that resettled survivors needed extra support and long-term guidance. Therefore, they intended to be a part of the community for up to 15 years, paralleling the mortgages received from the organization. This commitment provided a stability that, along with sanctions, anchored the new social structures.

Second, the Fundación integrated itself into the social, economic, and political aspects of the community. Socially, the organization encouraged the input of the initial 200 families in the creation of a code of conduct, which each family was obligated to sign. This set of norms, drawing upon Christian beliefs and ideals, created common vision and goals for all residents to abide by and reproduce. Economically, with recurring funds from the mortgages, the Fundación provided support for community celebrations and improving infrastructure and micro-loans for small business owners or entrepreneurs. Politically, as a voting member within the community, the Fundación could maintain the original vision, goals, and values decided upon by the community.

Third, the interim leadership and organizational integration were buttressed by the ability to intervene in community affairs. Fundación sponsorship of the project, ownership of house mortgages, and endorsement of the code of conduct provided the legitimacy to hold people accountable through formal and informal sanctions. Formal sanctions included the removal of problematic families in the community (drug dealers, gang affiliation, and abusive spouses). Informal sanctions developed through the creation and reproduction of social norms and behaviors, as described in the subsection “Path Dependency: A Framework for a Resettlement’s Social Development.” This created a social structure under which the community would operate. The drawback was the creation of dependency upon the Fundación, raising concerns that residents will be unable to lead their own community once the organization leaves.

España was built and maintained by the Honduran Red Cross (HRC), with support from the Red Cross partners in the United States, Switzerland, and Spain (hence the name). The HRC's goal was also to create a model community, to be utilized as an example of successful resettlement in future projects. However, although the infrastructure was equal to, if not better than, Divina’s, España’s development strategies did not provide a firm foundation on which to create social structures.

Like the Fundación, the HRC also wanted to provide interim leadership, but in a less invasive way. The HRC does not usually engage in development, as this type of work conflicts with historical goals of disaster and war relief. The organizational goal was originally to build homes, leaving the government or other NGOs to work on the development process. However, since external support never arrived and residents continually begged the organization not to leave, the HRC felt obligated to stay. It was nearly a decade before the organization finally decoupled itself from the community.

The HRC was never integrated into the various aspects of the community. According to Fiona, an HRC social worker and staffer in España for the entire development process, the motto in addressing resident concerns was the following:
Creating Community after Disaster

“We wanted residents to come to us for help. But we were not going to help them. We were only going to show them which other doors [e.g. government departments] they needed to knock on.” Their hands-off strategy put the responsibility back onto the residents, especially community leadership (patronato), with varying degrees of success. It was not within the purview of the organization to guide and support the development of the nascent community.

Additionally, rather than having residents pay a long-term mortgage, the HRC implemented a work equity system. After a representative from each household worked for 40 weeks on the construction of the community, they were given the keys to their new house. Unlike the Fundación, once the houses were provided to residents, the NGO had very little power to impose formal or informal sanctions on problematic residents within España.

Without strong support, the España community struggled to create new norms and to protect itself from corruption, crime, and gang activity. This missing sense of community also, arguably, led to lower social health outcomes. Despite this, España residents have been directing their own community for years, making them a completely independent entity in comparison with Divina.

METHODS

Government, community, and organization documents, including crime statistics, were collected and analyzed. Records and documents were obtained from both the Fundación and the HRC, which offer perspectives of each entity concerning their role and responsibility. Police records from each community also provide data on differences in number and types of crime. A 96-question household survey was conducted as a census in Spanish by the author and his team in Divina (N = 449 of 585 homes) and a random sample in España (N = 506 of 1285 homes) between October 2009 and January 2010. These surveys provide insight into the social health consequences and opinions about organizational practices by NGOs. The author also lived in Divina for 9 months spending on average 1 day a week in España, which provided an insider’s view of community dynamics and community–NGO interactions and relationship.

The HRC and Fundación staff were interviewed to obtain a personal perspective on the philosophies and practices of the organization. Residents and leaders in Divina and España were interviewed (36 were recorded and transcribed) in order to gain a broad picture of the sense of social health and beliefs about the developmental trajectory of their community. For a more detailed discussion about data and methods, please see Alaniz (2012a), Chapter 2.

PATH DEPENDENCY: A FRAMEWORK FOR A RESETTLEMENT’S SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

A path dependency framework offers guidance in explaining which key processes set the resettlement on one particular trajectory rather than another, as well as sustain the movement along that path (Aminzade 1992, 2013). Together, these processes
provide an opportunity for the creation of increasing return mechanisms or self-reinforcing/positive feedback processes that make a reversal or divergence from the path difficult (Pierson 2000). In the case of Divina and España, it can be argued that, although they had similar initial conditions, it was the divergent NGO and resident practices that formed different social norms (Turner and Killian 1972). These norms were also reinforced differently over time by each organization and community, which promoted increasing returns, embedding the norms, thus creating a particular path for each respective community.

To illustrate how the process of path dependence occurred for each community, a conceptual chronological figure is constructed (Figure 6.1). There are four periods which each resettlement follows as part of its development into community: initial conditions, formation of social norms, conciliation of norms, and increasing returns. Each will be discussed in detail subsequently.

**INITIAL CONDITIONS**

Initial conditions (see Figure 6.1, I) are the starting points of each resettlement, wherein any path can be chosen (Pierson 2000). These initial similarities provide a foundation for a comparison of development from resettlement to community. Residents had similar backgrounds with regard to post-Mitch trauma, origin of pre-Mitch home, and health. They were also racially/ethnically identical and held similar cultural and normative understandings based on a national identity. Finally, each resettlement was supported by NGOs that had comparable characteristics in terms of their time frame, vision, and goals for the community (see Alaniz 2012a for further discussion). Divina and España were built about 5 km apart, in nearly identical geographic spaces. These similarities suggest that the communities could have taken the same development trajectory, if they had engaged in similar key practices (processes)
that would have provided each with the structure necessary to develop in a socially healthy way (Goldstone 1998).

Pierson’s (2000, 251) claim that “large consequences may result from relatively small or contingent events” enables us to understand the importance of how the community norms and goals were framed by the NGO and maintained and reproduced by the community. As described above, the initial conditions of these communities were comparable, but the stochastic processes within each new community and the increasing returns of these processes affected its long-term outcomes.

**Formation of Social Norms**

The second time period (see Figure 6.1, II), moving from resettlement toward community, is characterized by the formation of social norms. These are formal or informal rules that define expected, acceptable, or required behavior in particular circumstances and that are learned through social interaction (NSNI 2014). Social norms are in a dialectical relationship with social health. Without the formation of new social norms, which provide guidance, structure, and vision to a community, the data suggest that residents returned to their previous norms of community, which had significant social health issues. Like the adage “One knows the type of tree by the fruit it produces,” social health is the fruit of the norm formation. However, in a cyclical way, the social health of the community also reaffirms and reproduces the present norms. As residents witness their neighbors either raising standards of behavior or returning to previous behaviors, the *sui generis* (Durkheim 1984 [1893]) norm formation becomes either formalized (in which sanctions may be imposed) as more people accept and reproduce the norm or irrelevant as residents discard the new for past norms (sanctions may be difficult to impose).

In the cases of Divina and España, the social norms of trust, social cohesion, and collective efficacy, especially as they apply to crime rates, are central. Due to the emergent nature of the communities, the lack of long-term social networks, and the fact that it was a complete resettlement created a liminal space, this enabled previous social norms and understandings of community to be open to redefinition. How these norms were initially defined by the NGO and residents set a particular standard and expectation for behavior.

A unique characteristic of a new resettlement built by an NGO is the necessity for the organization and early residents to define behavioral parameters beforehand. A community culture and various organizing norms are not clear, as each family arrives with differing expectations. In addition, residents come from peripheral impoverished areas and have been recent victims of the hurricane, which typically include experiences of trauma. Peripheral areas, such as unsanctioned peri-urban areas or poverty-stricken city zones, often wrestle with higher crime and lower social capital compared to wealthier suburbs (Jargowsky and Park 2009; Shaw and McKay 1942). Post-disaster primary and secondary trauma (Gill 2007) and moving into resettlements in which they do not know their neighbors create a particularly vulnerable group, but also one within which culture can be shaped.

* This is most commonly discussed in reference to crime per Cooter (2000) and Etzioni (2000).
The difficulty of this task is immense. Imagine a group of hundreds or thousands of near strangers from all over a city being brought to a new place to live. Each individual would have his or her own opinion about what that new place should look like, how it should run, what the rules are, and what is best for the whole. Each has a set of norms and values that they had previously lived by, which may or may not resonate with others. How does this group of individuals define a common set of rules to live by? The cases of Divina and España illustrate that, in the liminal space where everyone is arriving fresh and there is not an embedded social or normative structure, emergent norms can be created *sui generis*.

Organizations and early residents had an opportunity to define new social norms. However, each NGO chose different development strategies. The Fundación took an interventionist approach to community development that incorporated a focus on the creation of social norms and institutions. The HRC, however, maintained a partnership approach that encouraged agency by resettlement leaders and an independence-driven development. However, when asked about community development theories, directors from both the Fundación and the HRC noted that they originally did not know of any. They did their best with the resources and knowledge they had available, often making *ad hoc* decisions.

Divina had much stricter practices of social control, due, in large part, to the influence of the Fundación. The Fundación’s practices created a norm of social order; residents followed the rules to avoid the informal and formal sanctions by community leaders and the NGO. Residents were socialized to follow, and later maintain, the rules, which then became the cultural expectation and value (collective efficacy) of the community. Due to the high integration of the Fundación, the organization was able to intervene through formal sanctions, such as removing or threatening to remove problematic residents. It also empowered residents to impose informal and formal sanctions on themselves and each other. Positive sanctions included public recognition. Negative sanctions could be as invisible as gossip or as overt as using the Fundación or the police to correct neighbor’s behavior. Thus, resident’s actions supported a common vision and norm formation.

In Divina, social order created social norms, which, in turn, reproduced a concomitant level of social order. As outlined below, the same can go for neighborly trust, community participation, and collective efficacy. The philosophy and practice of the Fundación, which included input from residents from the beginning and the maintenance of that same practice over time, were the critical elements in the types of norms created and its influence over residents. Similarly, Inglehart and Baker (2000) find that, if no new vision or norms are put into place, residents will fall back on previous norms. Thus, communities with weaker social norm formation would return to previously understood norms, such as those common in Tegucigalpa. There could even be a breakdown of norms, as conflict among stakeholders would prevent a common set of norms from being created.

Unlike the Fundación, the HRC did not focus on social order or the creation of norms. Its partnership approach left residents to their own devices to create community, while also having to deal with trauma, vulnerabilities, and livelihood. Without the extra support of the NGO, España residents were unable to develop the new social norms that would provide the foundation for better social health in their
Creating Community after Disaster

Community (Alaniz 2012a). These new norms promoted by the NGO and negotiated by initial residents became embedded (to some extent) and were then shared with the next cohort of entering residents. Although not set in stone, the (lack of) preliminary framing and enforcement of the *new* norms would set the parameters for future discussions on behaviors, values, and goals in the community.

**Conciliation of Norms**

Almost immediately, residents and the supporting NGO engaged in a conciliation or conflict of social norms (see Figure 6.1, III). Once residents moved into the community, they had to decide whether and how much they would invest in each norm. It is at this stage that conflict began. In both cases, the NGO and some residents became proponents of its social norm ideals, whereas other individuals and groups or residents decided to accept some norms and contest others. This conciliation is the second critical element in the shaping of social norms of the communities. Each action taken by the NGO and residents to reinforce a structure or permit its change is important to the new norms that will eventually guide the community.

In Divina, the Fundación implemented a “Norms of Conduct and Living in Community” manual (*Manual de Normas de Conducta y Convivencia Comunitaria*). This document was written in conjunction with the first 200 families. It defined resettlement norms, which were both different from and stricter than norms found in Tegucigalpa. The manual became the guide for the community. Each resident had to sign that they and their family agreed to live by the code of conduct in order to obtain a home. This led to conflict over time, as not all residents wanted to follow the strict nature of the manual. They did not like mortgage payments and the Fundación’s heavy presence in community affairs. Residents voiced their opposition with protests, angry letters, threats, and marches. However, over time and through formal sanctions, Divina maintained the initial set of social norms, which further anchored them into the minds of residents.

España had the opposite experience. As the HRC was not involved in the formation of the norms but instead handed the process over to residents, a conduct manual was never written. Additionally, since there was no formal leadership by the HRC and the initial *patronato* (governing political body) did not have much power to enforce particular norms or social order, residents followed the norms they had known in their previous Tegucigalpa neighborhoods. These norms tended to isolate individuals, did not encourage civic participation or social capital, and, ultimately, discouraged involving oneself in building the resettlement into a community.

Doña Rosa, executive director of the Fundación, noted the importance of time and involvement in the resettlements. She said, “In Divina it took six years for the resettlement to become a community ... It was after six years that people finally started working together as a community; working together on community projects.” Again, in the context of post-disaster new resettlements, it appears to take time and concerted, consistent guidance to set the residents on a track that will have better social health outcomes than the neighborhoods they had known before.
**Increasing Returns**

Once the norms have been internalized by residents, they begin to take on a life of their own in a process of *increasing returns* (Figure 6.1, IV). This refers to the self-reinforcing nature of norms. Using a rolling snowball metaphor, if high trust, high social capital, and high collective efficacy are developed as social norms and reinforced through practice (activities and informal and formal sanctions), the social health outcomes will continue to build upon themselves. A social norm of high trust, for example, will in turn continue to reproduce trust, as untrustworthy behavior is negatively sanctioned. A norm of passive acceptance of the top-down decisions of strong leaders will reproduce quiescence rather than active civic engagement and democratic participation.

Although there are many mechanisms that affect increasing returns of particular norms, two stand out as critically important in post-disaster resettlements: NGO leadership in the development of norms and social order. Although the HRC had an amazing reputation, their historical organizational philosophy prevented them from using it as a means to maintain order or to shape the resettlement social norms. Since the organization took a partnership approach, it was not able to protect the new and weak political, social, and economic institutions from troublemakers in the community and external influences, such as gangs. Once residents had paid their dues through 40 weeks of work, the HRC handed them their keys, relinquishing control over any activity in the community. The organization provided as much support as they could in terms of capacity building and leadership, but they were working in multiple areas in the country. In addition, their focus has always been disaster relief, not disaster recovery and community development. Norm formation and conciliation was beyond their purview, which led residents to believe that their new home was culturally no different than their previous home.

Evidence supports the idea that the HRC partnership approach was not enough to support the weak initial norm structures. Politically, the *patronato* declined slowly from 2008 to 2011, until it disappeared completely for various reasons. These include leadership incompetence and corruption, the theft of funds by the water board, nepotism, and massive distrust among residents of political figures (Alaniz 2012a) (Table 6.2).

Socially, there continues to be low trust and cohesion among neighbors. Crime has ebbed and flowed. Residents’ perception is that it is high, and many believe that

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<th>Leadership over Time in the Community</th>
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<td><strong>Divina</strong></td>
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<td>Worse (%)</td>
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<td>15**</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>España</strong></td>
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<td>62</td>
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*Note:* In comparison with the first years, is the community leadership doing worse, the same, or better than the first years?

**Z-score:** *05; **01.
it is increasing. This fear, along with the number of crimes and homicides, has made many community members afraid to leave their homes alone. Although there was high hope to create something different initially, residents reverted back to the way of life previously known in Tegucigalpa: isolated, fearful, and self-protective. Most residents interviewed were either indifferent or apathetic about the future of their community, due to the result of key processes or the failure of key institutions. It is not that they do not want better for themselves and their children; rather, it is that they do not believe that they can really affect change. This sentiment reflects the broader feeling in Honduras, as gang influence continues to grow nationally alongside the murder rate.

However, Divina has had a very different experience. The Fundación guided the creation of and continued to maintain strong norms and social order. Its interventionist approach found ways of removing problematic residents through nonpayment of mortgage. The organization also stayed heavily involved in politics, economic development, and social conflict. The Fundación was able to protect budding institutions, such as the Comité Cívico Social (Divina’s governing body), and to maintain order in the community and between residents. The Fundación had the legitimacy of the Catholic Church and the power provided by their role both in building the community and in collecting mortgages. One long-time resident, Don Hernan, even noted, Estamos en el paraíso (“We are in Paradise”).

With the protection and intervention of the Fundación, each institution was able to maintain the original stringent and healthier norm formation and avoid problems such as corruption, nepotism, high crime, conflict, and massive theft of community materials. The community had a chance to build and maintain working institutions, albeit dependent and initially only semidemocratic ones. This created a sense of community pride. Pride, along with the values instilled in preserving strong institutions and guarding a lofty vision, encouraged residents to keep working for a better community. As they mentioned at nearly every meeting, “We are a model. We have not had any violent deaths in our community!”

From the depths of despair, Divina residents were able to arise in part due to what may have been constant increasing returns of community affirmation encouraging belief and enthusiasm. In the words of Arnold Toynbee (1889–1975), the famed English economic historian and social reformer, “Apathy can be overcome by enthusiasm, and enthusiasm can only be aroused by two things: first, an ideal, with takes the imagination by storm, and second, a definite intelligible plan for carrying that ideal into practice” (cited from Forbes 2014). While both communities had the ideal (new social norms to create a socially healthy community), it was the Fundación that provided the intelligible plan (norm formation and reinforcement) that made the continuation of the ideal (increasing returns) possible.

CONCLUSION

The development of community, specifically the formation of social norms, created a different path for each community. The Fundación took extraordinary steps to define and bound the actions, values, and even culture of the community. Their time-frame commitment was long term (15 years), their focus was a model community based
on Christian values (already embedded in Honduran culture), and their practice was interventionist. Though this led to both backlash and conflict initially, the current statistics demonstrate that Divina has had much better social health outcomes and is much closer to a cohesive community than its neighbor.

The HRC also took important steps toward the development of a sustainable, self-governing, and model community. Their time-frame commitment was short term, in 1–2-year intervals from 2005 to 2010, leading to less institutional stability. Their focus was a model community based on the values of empowerment and self-definition, and their practice was partnership. However, it appears that this was not enough. Approximately 60% of España residents surveyed wished that the organization would have had greater influence in their community.

These findings are particularly important for future post-disaster resettlement efforts, especially those with heterogeneous populations. Top-down interventionist approaches have been heavily critiqued. However, the examples of Divina and España illustrate that, when there are problematic norms and disaster survivors with significant vulnerability, new residents may need extra support and guidance to create a new set of healthier social norms.

REFERENCES


Creating Community after Disaster


# Author Query Sheet

## Chapter No. 6

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