

## Research Assessment Exercise 2020

### Impact Case Study

**University:** **The Hong Kong Polytechnic University** |

**Unit of Assessment (UoA):** **28 Social Work and Social Policy** |

**Title of case study:** **Post-disaster Community Psychosocial Capacity Building: Integrating Cultural Heritage and Local Resources** |

#### **(1) Summary of the impact**

Led by Dr Timothy Sim (PI), a seven-year post-disaster community psychosocial capacity-building program was developed after the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake in Sichuan Province, Mainland China. As a result of this program, there is now a **SICHUAN** model that is used to improve the psychosocial well-being of communities severely affected by disasters. The program's integration of cultural and local resources has proved to be the gold standard for efficacious community psychosocial capacity building. Over time, this trans-disciplinary model has generated sustained psychosocial changes in the communities where it has been adopted and has led to changes in the actions of stakeholders, particularly local governments, funders, and community organisations. It has also facilitated social workers in subsequent disaster management of Mainland China (the model was duplicated successfully after another earthquake occurred in Ludian County of Yunnan Province on 3 August 2014).

#### **(2) Underpinning research**

Large-scale disasters involve significant losses and adverse psychosocial impacts. Children, women, older people, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and the poor are the most vulnerable to these negative effects. The 2008 Wenchuan earthquake (measuring 7.9 on the Richter scale) devastated Sichuan—killing 90,000 people, injuring 350,000, and destroying the homes, hospitals, schools, power supplies, and transportation and communication systems for millions. Secondary hazards such as aftershocks and landslides have continued to plague the villages at the epicentre in the Wenchuan County of Sichuan Province. Between 2010 and 2013, the villagers were forced to evacuate, and in a recent landslide in August 2019, nine people were killed, 35 people remain missing, and more than 2,000 houses collapsed due to the heavy rain.

A unique longitudinal social work psychosocial capacity building program was developed by a trans-disciplinary team led by Dr. Timothy Sim, in collaboration with stakeholders (including government officials, non-government organisations, experts, and community representatives). A series of culturally and contextually sensitive research projects were undertaken to improve the psychosocial well-being of vulnerable groups after the Wenchuan earthquake [R1]. Unlike most post-disaster mental health interventions that focus on individuals and which often undermine the resilience of survivors and communities, we took into account the fact that each community has its own ways of dealing with the psychosocial challenges after a disaster.

In collaboration with our stakeholders, we developed a culturally relevant and contextually respectful model of capacity building, which was named the **SICHUAN** model. It is based on six key interlinked concepts which are applied in post-disaster contexts: (1) adopting a **Step-by-step** strategy cautiously; (2) **Involving** local stakeholders from the onset; (3) remaining **Contextually respectful** (of local culture and political consideration); (4) promoting self- and mutual-**Help**; (5) pursuing **United** efforts by collaborating with various stakeholders; and (6) **Adding No** trouble, chaos, or harm [R1]. Between 2008 and 2013, the model benefitted six schools, three towns, and approximately 5,060 students, 390 teachers, 750 parents, 270 seniors, and 240 women in Sichuan Province in Mainland China. Between 2014 and 2017, the model continued to promote community psychosocial capacity building in

Wenchuan County, particularly in Yingxiu Town, where the residents experienced recurring landslides. During this period, it influenced approximately 2,500 students, 85 teachers, 250 parents, 270 seniors, and 240 women.

Based on the above model and reiterative practice reflection and formative evaluations, the program developed in Mainland China is a series of psychosocial assessment and intervention tools for rural communities in post-disaster situations, which focuses on children [R2], women [R3], seniors [R4], and teachers [R5] who suffered great losses, injuries, and bereavements. These psychosocial assessments and interventions, the first of their kind in Mainland China, were clearly effective and received resoundingly positive feedback from the communities affected.

One of the exceptional aspects of this model lies in the optimal use of local resources and cultural heritage to heighten the resilience of individuals, families, and communities post-disaster [R1, R2, R3, R4, R5]. This is contrary to conventional post-disaster psychosocial interventions that are focused on individuals and pathologies. For example, the SICHUAN model uses local and cultural resources such as the traditional Tibetan dance “Guozhuang,” the new year painting “Nianhua,” and narrative documentation [R1, R2, R3, R4, R5] to provide psychosocial support for vulnerable groups. Moreover, the model involves close collaboration with stakeholders, including the affected individuals, their family members, community leaders, local government, and professionals from a range of professional background, who guide and inform both research and practice as the processes unfold [R1, R2, R3, R4, R5]. Our SICHUAN Model is considered as “good practice” internationally [R6].

### **(3) References to the research**

[R1] Sim, T., & Dominelli, L. (2017). When the mountains move: A Chinese post-disaster psychosocial work model. *Qualitative Social Work*, 16(5), 594–611.

[R2] Sim, T., & Chen, H. Q. (2015). *Post-disaster Children’s Psychosocial Work Handbook*. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press. [沈文伟、陈会全. (2015). 灾后儿童社会心理工作手册. 社会科学文献出版社] (in Chinese).

[R3] Sim, T., Lau, J., Cui, K., Wei, H.H. (2019). Post-disaster psychosocial capacity building for women in a Chinese rural village. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Science*, 10(2), 193–203. DOI: 10.1007/s13753-019-0221-1.

[R4] Cui, Ke., & Sim, T. (2017). Older people’s psychosocial needs in a disaster rural community of China: An exploratory study. *Natural Hazards*, 85(3), 1577–1590.

[R5] Sim, T. (2015). *Bouncing back together*. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press. [沈文伟. (2015). 一起重生: 三个震撼人生的故事. 社会科学文献出版社] (in Chinese).

[R6] Bragin, M. (2011). Clinical social work in situations of disaster and terrorism. In J. R. Brandell (Ed.). *Theory and practice in clinical social work*. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE.

### **(4) Details of the impact**

Most post-disaster psychosocial capacity-building programs are non-sustainable, focused on the individual, and pay no attention to the local cultural and political context. This is particularly the case in rural communities, where there are many vulnerable inhabitants. The unit developed a social work psychosocial program taking a novel approach that emphasizes the use of cultural heritage and local resources and involves a range of stakeholders. The program enhances the contribution of social work by adopted a trans-disciplinary approach (i.e., a multidisciplinary collaboration across sectors).

#### **4.1 Impact on stakeholders**

Through top-down and bottom-up initiatives of various stakeholders, the program has had the following impacts:

**Impact on local government.** As a result of the Chinese government's recognition of its positive impact on the local communities, the program received additional funding from the Shenzhen Ministry of Civil Affairs (RMB950,000) to develop its work and establish a local post-earthquake psychosocial capacity-building model (2014–2016). In 2016–2017, the Wenchuan local government provided funding of RMB100,000 to the Wenchuan Li Chuan Social Work Service Centre, an NGO that was created to oversee the program. This funding was used to continue providing services in the area of the earthquake epicentre and to establish the program in the town of Xuankou. The program represents a ground-breaking development for community social services in the region. It has changed the way the Wenchuan Yingxiu government engages with women, who are now invited to contribute to the local culture (for example, by reviving the Guozhuan dance) [S1].

**Impact on Funders.** The project received approximately HK\$11,433,124.35 from 2013 to 2018 from seven organisations and the Chinese government. When the project ended, the major donor, MINDSET, which is the philanthropic arm of the Jardine Matheson group, published a booklet entitled “Breaking Ground on Broken Ground.” It describes the impact of the program: “Eight-year social work programmes are rare in rural China. Fortunately, the commitment of Dr Sim and continued faith and funding from MINDSET allowed the Programme to run its course and for the wounds of the people to begin healing. By the end, residents of the Yingxiu region went from having little to no idea what a social worker was to regarding them as family” [S2].

**Impact on schools.** The principal of the Yingxiu Primary School acknowledged that “In all the school inspections and evaluations of Yingxiu Primary School in recent years after the horrific earthquake, our students have performed outstandingly despite the horrific loss (222 out of 500 students died in the 2008 earthquake). Other than the contributions of our teachers, the contribution of the Social Work station is paramount” [S3]. In light of the program's impact, Dr. Sim was appointed as the Honorary Principal of Wenchuan Yingxiu Primary School [S4].

**Impact on vulnerable groups.** Children, women, teachers of the bereaved, seniors, ethnic minorities, and people who were disabled by the earthquake were our focus. The program helped to improve their psychosocial capacity and quality of life by capitalizing on their cultural and community resources via collaboration with various stakeholders [S5, S6, S7]. In 2016, a parent whose daughter was disabled during the earthquake wrote a letter to the program staff in which she noted, “You used social work, psychology, sociology, and a range of professional knowledge in an integrative manner, and effectively incorporated examples and cases to help us appreciate the legal and policy implications for our particular situations. This helped us to plan our roads ahead. Most importantly, through the range of activities and programs you implemented, we have helped parents in our group (whose children were disabled in the earthquake) to benefit from mutual help and mutual learning” [S8].

**Impact of the model application.** The psychosocial toolkits generated by the practice research were adopted by local social workers after the 2014 Ludian earthquake [S9]. Dr. Sim was appointed as a committee member by the Ministry of Civil Affairs to coordinate the training and supervision of 60 social workers appointed by the local and central government using the SICHUAN model as a central framework. Applying the SICHUAN model, the Ludian Zhaotong Hospital established the first-ever “post-disaster medical social work station” in Mainland China, serving 375 patients who were severely affected by the earthquake. As noted in the letter from the Ludian Zhaotong Hospital, the station “continues to promote medical social work even after The Hong Kong Polytechnic University concluded its project in the hospital. Meanwhile, the post-

disaster medical social work station has gone beyond the boundaries of the hospital to the community, which has been highly endorsed by the local government” [S9].

#### **4.2 Boosting the capacity of the social work profession when dealing with disaster management in China**

Before 2008, Chinese social workers were excluded from China’s disaster management systems. Our research and practice improved the capacity and skills of social workers in disaster management and provided policy-makers and the general public with evidence that revised their understanding of the profession. The Department of Civil Affairs of Sichuan Province set up the first “special disaster social work team” on 15 July 2015 to provide immediate post-disaster services to the province. Of the appointed 19 supervisors and 22 social workers, nine were members of the program [S10].

A group of 20 representatives and leading scholars from the United Kingdom Research Councils (now known as UK Research Innovation [UKRI]) visited the program on 23 November 2014 for a full-day session. They were given a detailed introduction to the program that included interactions with local villagers and government representatives. In 2017, as a result of this visit, Dr. Sim was invited to be an expert member of the panel reviewing the UKRI Global Challenge Research Funds (GCRF). GCRF aims to increase its research capability by collaborating with various stakeholders from a range of sectors to meet the challenges faced by developing countries, such as natural disasters and climate change. Their funding ranges from GBP2,000,000 to GBP20,000,000. Dr. Sim is the only social work professional from Hong Kong and Mainland China on the panel. |

#### **(5) Sources to corroborate the impact**

[S1] Letter from Wenchuan Yingxiu Government, 18 June, 2019.

[S2] MINDSET Limited. (2018). Breaking ground on broken ground. Hong Kong: MINDSET.

[S3] Letter from the Principal of the Yingxiu Primary School, Mr. Dong Xuefeng, November 2016.

[S4] The Hong Kong Polytechnic University Department of Applied Social Sciences Website: News and Events, Dr. Timothy SIM appointed as the Honorary Principal of Wenchuan Yingxiu Primary School, Sichuan, China. <https://www.polyu.edu.hk/apss/news-and-events/737-dr-timothy-sim-appointed-as-the-honorary-principal-of-wenchuan-yingxiu-primary-school-sichuan-china>.

[S5] Chang, S. (2016, May 17). Eight years after: Closing the door on the past. China Daily, Hong Kong Focus, pp. 8 – 9. Retrieved 11 October 2017, from: [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/hkedition/2016-05/17/content\\_25314329.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/hkedition/2016-05/17/content_25314329.htm).

[S6] Letter from Wenchuan Children and Youth Activity Center, 11 November 2016.

[S7] Letter from Hanwang Zhongxin Primary School, Mr. Ji Zhuren, 22 November 2016.

[S8] Letter from the parent of a disabled adolescent, of Hanwang Zhongxin Primary School, Mr. Jiang Yong, November 2016.

[S9] Letter from Ludian Zhaotong Hospital, 11 February 2018.

[S10] The Hong Kong Polytechnic University Department of Applied Social Sciences Website: News and Events, Special disaster social work team in Sichuan, China. <https://www.polyu.edu.hk/apss/news-and-events/696-special-disaster-social-work-team-in-sichuan>.