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Published: 01/01/2019

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Please cite the original version:
Farny, S., Kibler, E., & Down, S. (2019). How social entrepreneurs can build institutions through mobilizing collective emotions following natural disasters. *Public blog of the American Sociological Association (ASA)* "Work-in-Progress: Sociology on the economy, work and inequality" (<http://www.wipsociology.org/>).

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NOTE: The authors' blog article is based on and inspired by their published paper in the *Academy of Management Journal* (AMJ). Thus, for a definitive and full version of the authors' work please refer to the published source at AMJ: Farny, S., Kibler, E. & Down, S. (2019) Collective emotions in institutional creation work. **Academy of Management Journal**. Vol. 62, No. 3, 765–799, see: <https://journals.aom.org/doi/10.5465/amj.2016.0711>.

How social entrepreneurs can build institutions through mobilizing collective emotions following natural disasters

by *Steffen Farny, Ewald Kibler and Simon Down*

What happens to disaster-affected communities once the NGOs and media circus fly off to the next disaster? Our recently published [research](#) on the work of returnee social entrepreneurs in Haiti addresses this important question.

Aside from the recent Oxfam scandal where aid workers exploited sex workers, Haiti's progress in rebuilding since the devastating 2010 earthquake has been conspicuously absent from the news. Our research explores how longer-term disaster recovery and rebuilding actually takes shape.

Understanding the means by which communities can recover from disaster and build better, more resilient institutions (schools, physical infrastructure, workplaces, etc.) is a non-trivial matter. After most extreme natural hazards, communities struggle to cope with the them and bounce back, often for years. This is partly because effective institutional support and organizing templates are frequently absent during the post-disaster recovery.

Our [research](#) shows that institutional workers, specifically social entrepreneurs, are key social actors that can fill the institutional voids and build community capacity.

Institution building after natural disasters

In the research, we demonstrate how the institutional work of social entrepreneurs creates new institutions via mobilizing the collective emotions of the local community. We draw on a five-year ethnographic study of a community in Haiti that was affected by the earthquake of 2010. We examined the activities of community actors including [Steve Mathieu and Gabrielle Aurel](#), as they sought to coordinate local development efforts with broader post-disaster initiatives.

We identified two key problems. First, a large number of internal refugees from the disaster-stricken capital region needed to be integrated within other communities. Second, a Cholera epidemic had to be managed and contained.

As we went around the communities with Steve and Gabi we noticed that the people of the village and surrounding areas have developed greater confidence and hope for the future in the triumphs and setbacks of tackling these problems.

To understand what happened we turned to the sociology of emotions to explain how the social entrepreneurs, supported by modest NGO funds and hand-me-downs (a discarded UN tent was transformed into a school), were able to build effective institutions.

Our observations strongly support recent academic work that focuses on the ability of social actors to engage in practices that create, maintain and disrupt institutions. Existing research tend to regard such [institutional work](#) as a cognitive process. But our research and that of [others demonstrate](#) the obvious prevalence of [collective emotions](#) in the field that drives the institution building.

This motivates the question of how the *practices* of Gabi and Steve actually created and mobilized collective emotions, and how this led to institution building. What, exactly, were the social mechanisms that can explain our observations?

Collective emotions and institution building

We see a lot of emotion following a disaster. People are grieving, traumatized and bereft, and this can transform into despair. Collective efforts can help alleviate suffering. However, little is known about the post-disaster practices of NGOs, local officials, or social entrepreneurs and how their efforts affect the *collective* emotional states of recovering communities over time. Even less is known about how collective emotions might constrain or enable the emergence of institutions such as schools, workplaces, and other physical and symbolic infrastructure in the long run.

In the commune of Limonade in the North of Haiti, we observed and analyzed such long-term recovery work, and investigated *how collective emotions enable the creation of institutions*.

We found that the work of Steve, Gabi, and their colleagues provoked and surfaced emotions in such a way that community feelings would converge. They were able to integrate these collective emotions (of hope, feelings of greater security, affective solidarity, compassionate empathy, and so on) in their daily work across all three post-disaster phases: the immediate disaster response; the temporary disaster recovery; and the long-term disaster reconstruction phase.

In the disaster response work immediately following the earthquake, Gabi and Steve improvised with available resources, assessed the villagers' immediate needs, worked with the community to allocate tasks and roles, and led and coordinated local response efforts.

As the recovery progressed, they built a higher level of trust through collaborating and valuing villagers' participation in their various initiatives. Slowly, a new collective vision for how daily life could look like a few years later emerged.

Even when initiatives failed to deliver on their primary purpose immediately, the symbolic effect in building trust and confidence was vital. The building of eco-toilet centers called "chateau caca" [shit castle] to combat Cholera provided work and focus in the community rebuilding, though they

didn't achieve the intended goals due to a lack of plumbing infrastructure. Local carpenters continued to embellish the toilet blocks and the area even became a hang-out place for cool kids.

Similarly, the "School of Hope" construction project in the nearby Cima neighborhood, provided a symbol of affective solidarity and collective hope for a better future, in addition to a much-needed facility for education.

Also in the intermediate disaster recovery phase, the power of symbols to mobilize local people is not to be under-estimated. This is when most international NGOs leave the field, leaving recovering communities in a state of limbo. While lives have been saved and stability and security has been achieved to a degree, there are few substantial symbols projecting a better future beyond piles of discarded plastic water bottles. Following the immediate disaster relief efforts, local people mostly distrusted the large international disaster recovery schemes. Nonetheless, they trusted Steve and Gabi and worked with them on their part of NGO funded recovery projects, instilling hope for the future.

Steve and Gabi and others continued their institutional work of mobilizing local engagement, educating people, and synergizing rebuilding efforts. Five years after the 2010 earthquake, in contrast to many other recovering communities, Limonade was doing well. The local production of farm produce and poultry was firmly established and a new university campus had been built, attracting further business opportunities. The institutional work in the intermediate recovery phase had continued and created greater opportunities for local people in the form of jobs and education. Overall, Limonade exhibited greater collective confidence and a passion for the future. The community was then committed to engaging with and supporting the emergent permanent physical infrastructure, which would be an ultimate objective of the post-disaster work.

Two mechanisms of collective emotions in institutional creation work

Conceptually our study shows the functioning of two mechanisms of collective emotions in institution-building across all post-disaster phases.

We label the first as *justifying function of collective emotions*. This concept explains that the sort of institutional work practices that Steve and Gabi and their colleagues engaged in create new community arrangements and synchronize collective emotional experience. Collective emotions justify the appropriateness of their work practices, whether it concerns local people's feeling of security, sharing a sense of affective solidarity, or collective confidence. In essence collective emotions serve the function of collectively approving/disapproving what key actors do.

We call the second concept as *motivating function of collective emotions*. Collective emotions not only passively justify the actions of social actors like Steve and Gabi, they also motivate people to join with them in building new community arrangements and institutions.

A call for more support of local actors in post-disaster development

Our research implies that disaster response and development agencies and NGOs should intensify their support for local social entrepreneurs and community activists. Our research shows that their ability to engender greater trust and higher emotional investment can outweigh this risk of fueling corruption and nepotism. We demonstrate that people like Steve and Gabi can act as a

catalyst to mobilize the emotional energies required to develop much-needed new institutional arrangements in such disaster-affected communities. As the Oxfam and other scandals show, the non-indigenous alternative also carries significant risk, which clearly does little to build positive collective emotions.

Read More

Steffen Farny, Ewald Kibler, and Simon Down. “[Collective Emotions in Institutional Creation Work](#)” in *Academy of Management Journal* 2019.



Image: Sonje Ayiti Organisation