Disaster Narratives Informing Advancements in Understanding of Interdependencies of Social Networks and Built Environment in Crisis and Recovery

Progress Report

2018

Interdisciplinary Team:

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Activities Accomplished to Date

Since the awarding of the grant, the following activities have been accomplished.

Meetings. The team met on several occasions to discuss how best to respond to an NSF request for proposals on Human Disasters and the Built Environment with an interdisciplinary approach that combines engineering, the social sciences and the humanities. A graduate student completed a literature review of social capital and disasters, the results of which provided a foundation for a framework for an interdisciplinary approach. The methodological approach involves interviewing residents of Dominica.

Meetings with Dominicans. Prior to this grant’s funding, previous efforts had established a local community coalition in Soufriere and Scotts Head that had identified and prioritized community projects. When contacted regarding potential visits from Clemson faculty, the community respondents emphasized the devastation of the area left in the wake of Hurricane Maria and the equally devastating slow recovery and rebuilding, suggesting travel was not advisable. To respond to the immediate crisis, Dr. Ogle organized a food and supply drive that resulted in a container being loaded, transported to Miami and shipped by boat to Dominica. Among other relief efforts, the container contained tools to set-up a tool lending library.

Dominica. Finally, in May, Dr. Ogle and Dr. Small visited the island. Upon approach, the extent of the devastation was easily visible from the airplane window. What had previously appeared as a tropical rainforest, now appeared as a winter landscape, with bare brown trunks of trees exposed for the first time. On the ground, a similar grim reality was visible with many homes unroofed, and in Soufriere, still no electricity. Meetings were held individually with community leaders related to local government, the local water authority and ordinary citizens. The idea of collecting a “My Maria Story” from local residents that would provide pilot data for an NSF application resonated with residents who were still recovering from the hurricane’s impact. A future visit was planned.
Funding. A small foundation agreed to work with Clemson faculty and provide funding to work on community development projects in Soufriere to establish a more secure water resource. Specifically, approximately 100K has been raised to facilitate capping the local open water source that was rendered unsafe during hurricane Maria. The funding has the dual purpose of establishing credibility for Clemson researchers with local community residents.

Description of Challenges and Proposed Strategies

A primary challenge is figuring out the logistical challenges for travel to Dominica to collect pilot data. The logistical challenges for travel are complicated by having to coordinate four faculty members’ travel schedules with local Dominican opportunities. To avoid hurricane season, future travel will likely take place in the Spring of 2019.

Next Steps.

Next steps include (a) visiting Dominica to arrange pilot data collection, (b) writing up an NSF grant proposal, and (c) working with locals to identify other sources of funding for research and rebuilding.