



“When silence falls and other professionals leave”: Social work practice in times of disaster

23.5.2024

**International Summer School:
Social Work and Social Science from a Global Perspective
University of Lapland**

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Images: Kaisa Väyrynen



SOSIAALI- JA
TERVEYSMINISTERIO



UNIVERSITY OF LAPLAND
LAPIN YLIOPISTO



These maps show the location of the hospital in Gaza where hundreds were killed.

New York Times
18.10.2023

Sept. 8

AFRICA

Powerful Earthquake Shakes Morocco, Killing More Than 2,000

The quake, centered in the mountains just outside of Marrakesh, was the strongest to hit that area in a century. "It didn't last long, but felt like years," said one woman who lives near the epicenter.

By Catie Edmondson, Aida Alami, Aurelien Breeden and Constant Méheut



New York Times
8.9.2023



FOREIGN AFFAIRS ARTICLE

Gaza's desperate civilians flee or huddle in hopes of safety, as warnings of Israeli offensive mount

10/14/23 09:05 AM EDT

An estimated 1 million people have been displaced in Gaza in one week.

Politico 14.10.2023

Oct 18,
2023



'Nothing remains': Afghan mother loses all 7 children in quake

Afghanistan's Taliban government and international organizations estimate more than [2,000 people were killed across the region during an earthquake](#), and according to UNICEF, over 90% of the victims were women and children. CNN's Anna Coren reports.

CNN 18.10.2023

Alert and Ongoing Disasters



Red markers indicate ongoing situations. Orange markers indicate disaster alerts.

OCHA ReliefWeb 3.5.2024

WEATHER

Kenya floods leave more than 120 dead

More than 40 people die when a dam bursts near Mai Mahiu in Nakuru County, raising the death toll over the March to May rainy season above 120 people.



Source: Al Jazeera | April 29, 2024

(Al Jazeera)

@A3Labs

Al Jazeera 29.4.2024

School shooting brings up tough questions for Finland

4 April 2024

By Laura Gozzi, BBC News

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BBC 4.4.2024

Latest Headlines



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Lebanon [Children in Lebanon pay heavy price amid intensifying conflict in the south and compounding national crises](#)

OCHA ReliefWeb 30.4.2024

KATA-Project: Facing humanitarian catastrophes, mobilising adaptive governance and developing working methods in disaster social work

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*KATA-Project is funded by Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (STM), Decision no:
VN/14998/2022*

- New openings, practices and perspectives are needed in social work
- Social and human consequences of crises and disasters



Disasters – Conceptual definitions for social work

Unavoidable natural phenomena?

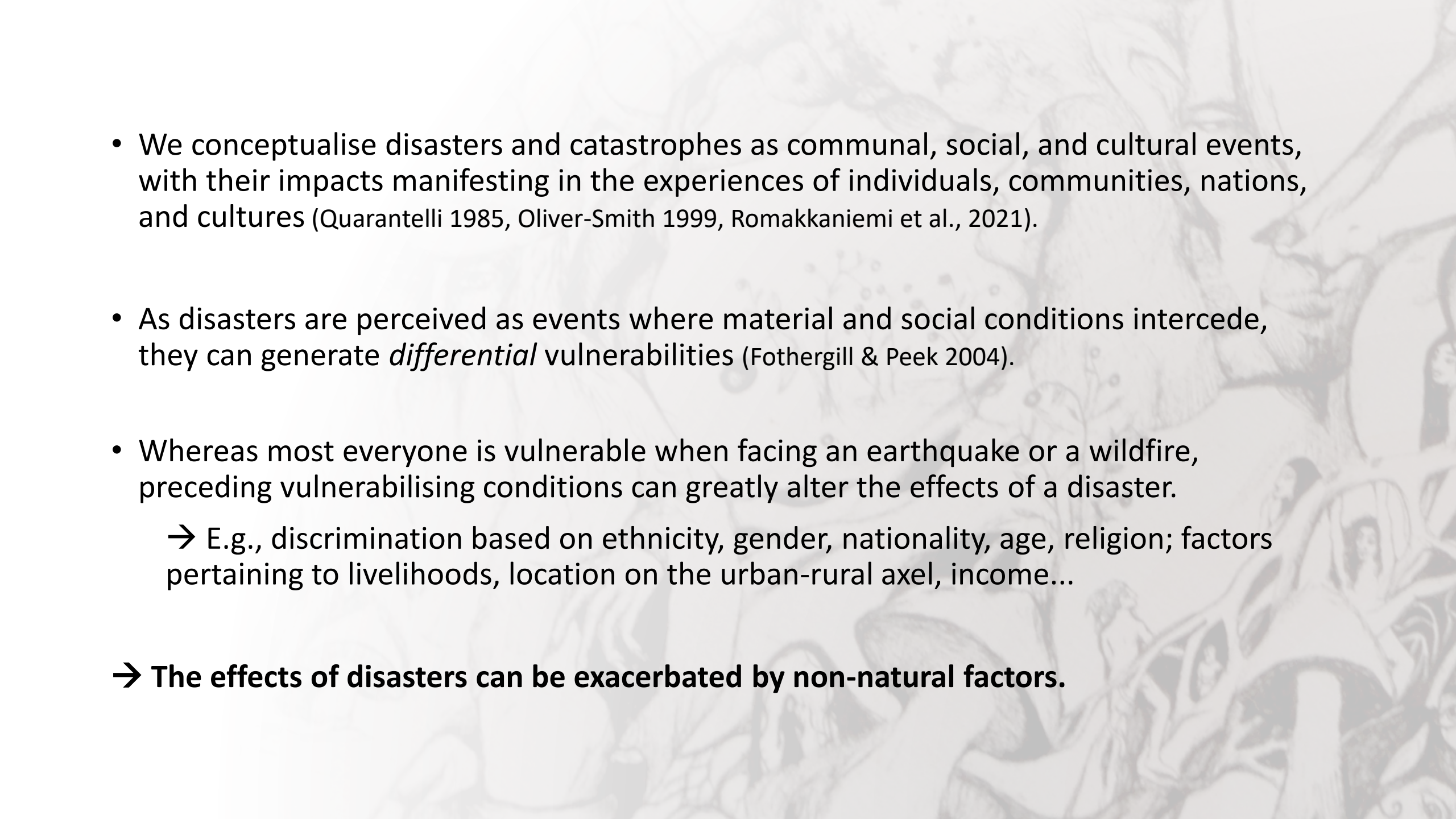
→ a growing debate whether disasters should be defined as ‘natural’. More favored approach is to examine disasters as events where material/environmental and social spheres intersect (see e.g., Neil 2006; Puttick, Boshier, and Chmutina 2018).

(a) To say that a disaster is ‘natural’ would presuppose that there exists disasters *for* nature: nature itself ‘follows’ only the (anthropocentrically conceived) ‘laws’ of its own;

(b) ‘Natural disaster’ presupposes that the effects of the disaster are unavoidable: although most of the effects and casualties can be avoidable/minimised, and;

(c) It disregards the necessity of an experiencer

→ Disasters become realised through the experiences of those who are affected by them.

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- We conceptualise disasters and catastrophes as communal, social, and cultural events, with their impacts manifesting in the experiences of individuals, communities, nations, and cultures (Quarantelli 1985, Oliver-Smith 1999, Romakkaniemi et al., 2021).
 - As disasters are perceived as events where material and social conditions intercede, they can generate *differential* vulnerabilities (Fothergill & Peek 2004).
 - Whereas most everyone is vulnerable when facing an earthquake or a wildfire, preceding vulnerabilising conditions can greatly alter the effects of a disaster.
 - E.g., discrimination based on ethnicity, gender, nationality, age, religion; factors pertaining to livelihoods, location on the urban-rural axel, income...
- The effects of disasters can be exacerbated by non-natural factors.**

DISASTER	VULNERABILITY FACTORS	SOCIAL AND HUMANE CONSEQUENCES
War, genocide, political persecution, natural hazard (earthquake, tsunami, environmental destruction, etc.)	Facing death, violence and their threat, loss of loved ones, disability, breakdown of social relationships, environmental chaos, forced displacement, political instability and power vacuums that create space for side effects and vulnerability	Trauma, grief, distress, insecurity, separation from loved ones, lack of future prospects, homelessness and displacement, exposure to violence, long-term political marginalisation
Damage and loss of home and dwellings/residences	Refugee and forced migration, homelessness, housing in temporary accommodation/apartment, (emergency accommodation, evacuation centres, refugee camps, crisis housing, etc.), prolonged temporary housing, increasing geographical poverty	Unsafety, material scarcity and deprivation, growing threats and risks, increase of vulnerabilities, breaking communities, formation of liminal communities, long-term effects of homelessness
Destruction and damage to structures supporting well-being	Disruptions and deterioration in the service system and communal well-being structures and/or safety nets, increased inequality	Mental and social distress, material scarcity, weakening and/or strengthening of resilience, loss of trust in institutions providing security, various forms of distress and inequality

Adapted from: Cowan & Corkery 2023; Felten-Biermann 2006; Li, Toll & Bentley 2023; Meierhenrich 2007; Mızrak & Çam 2022; Oyefara, Alabi 2016; Paudel & Le Billon 2020; Raschky & Schwindt 2009; SAMHSA 2023; Uddin et al. 2021; Watson, Gayer & Connolly 2007

DISASTER	VULNERABILITY FACTORS	SOCIAL AND HUMANE CONSEQUENCES
Destruction and damage to infrastructure	Destruction of road networks as well as water, waste, and healthcare systems; obstacles and delays in organising and delivering aid; inequality in the distribution and accessibility of relief	Epidemics, food and water shortages, communal inequality, hunger, diseases, chaos, unequal pre-conditions for coping
Destruction of the regional environment (production sector, residential areas, livelihoods)	Production problems related to food and other basic needs; the necessity of external loans or loan guarantees as well as accumulating debt for individuals, communities and states; regions ending up in private/investment use; gentrification; and the increase in the costs of reconstruction and aid.	Dependency on external aid; exploitation; regional inequality; weakening of regional sovereignty; the rich getting richer, the poor getting poorer (e.g., changes in land ownership, shifts in external dependencies and commitments and resulting questions of inequality)
Economic crises and instability, endangering and loss of livelihoods	Poverty, unemployment, loss of livelihoods; intensification of economic inequality; market for side effects and criminal activities (human trafficking, exploitation of vulnerability)	Weakening of the already vulnerable positions (e.g., forced and child marriages, decrease in education), lack and deficit of resources, destruction of everyday support structures, work-related migration, hunger, and illness

Adapted from: Cowan & Corkery 2023; Felten-Biermann 2006; Li, Toll & Bentley 2023; Meierhenrich 2007; Mızrak & Çam 2022; Oyefara, Alabi 2016; Paudel & Le Billon 2020; Raschky & Schwindt 2009; SAMHSA 2023; Uddin et al. 2021; Watson, Gayer & Connolly 2007

Disaster social work – Conceptualisations

Disasters concern social work in many ways.

However, the concept of disaster social work and the corresponding role, mission and position of social work in disaster contexts remain relatively unknown particularly in Nordic social work (see, however, Rapeli 2017, Harrikari & Rauhala 2023, Mikkonen et al., 2023).

The concept of disaster social work is used more often in other contexts (e.g. Pyles 2017; Maglajlic 2019), yet it lacks a precise definition.

What nuances do different conceptualisations get?

- Disaster social work as an own professional field
- Social work in disaster conditions
- Social work interventions as part of humanitarian aid work
- Social work with people affected by disasters



Builds on the concepts of trauma, stress, crisis, loss, separation, social support, survival (Dombo & Ahearn 2017), and relates with vulnerability and resilience, as well as social capital (Rapeli 2017).



Disaster social work – Approaches

Biobehavioral approach

Social work as a reactive psychosocial support organiser or as an extension of the health care field (Dodds & Nuehring 2017, Soliman & Rogge 2002)

Temporal approach (division to phases)

1. Problem prevention (preparation)
 2. Acute psychosocial intervention (response)
 3. Long-term support and rehabilitation (recovery)
- (Dombo & Ahearn 2017)

Holistic approach

The ecosocial dimension, psychosocial, economic and rights-related support, and a role in a broader international and societal contingency plan and risk management (e.g. Alston et al., 2019; Rapeli 2017)



Disaster social work – Practice

Methods and emphases

- Crisis intervention techniques and quick and acute strategies that aim to restore the situation to a stable or pre-disaster state
 - Psychosocial interventions, combining individual and social, economic and educational resources
 - Revitalisation of community resources
 - Flexibility and operational readiness for unusual and unexpected situations
 - Ability to acquire, recognise, choose and apply relevant information
 - Problem-solving and preparation skills
 - Multi-sectoral and inter-professional working orientation
- (Dombo & Ahearn 2017, Dominelli 2015; Rapeli 2017).



Research methods and data

Data

- *Interviews* with 1) peacekeepers in humanitarian hotspots on their perspectives of children's rights and **2) social workers and other professionals in disaster contexts and working with people coming from such circumstances**
- *Survey* for social service professionals on the disaster preparedness planning
- *Mapping* and analysing the preparedness plans of the municipalities/welfare regions – on social work's role and position in the societal preparedness planning

Ethical considerations

- Researching with people in/from disaster contexts
- Privacy, anonymity and rights of the participants
- Epistemological hierarchies

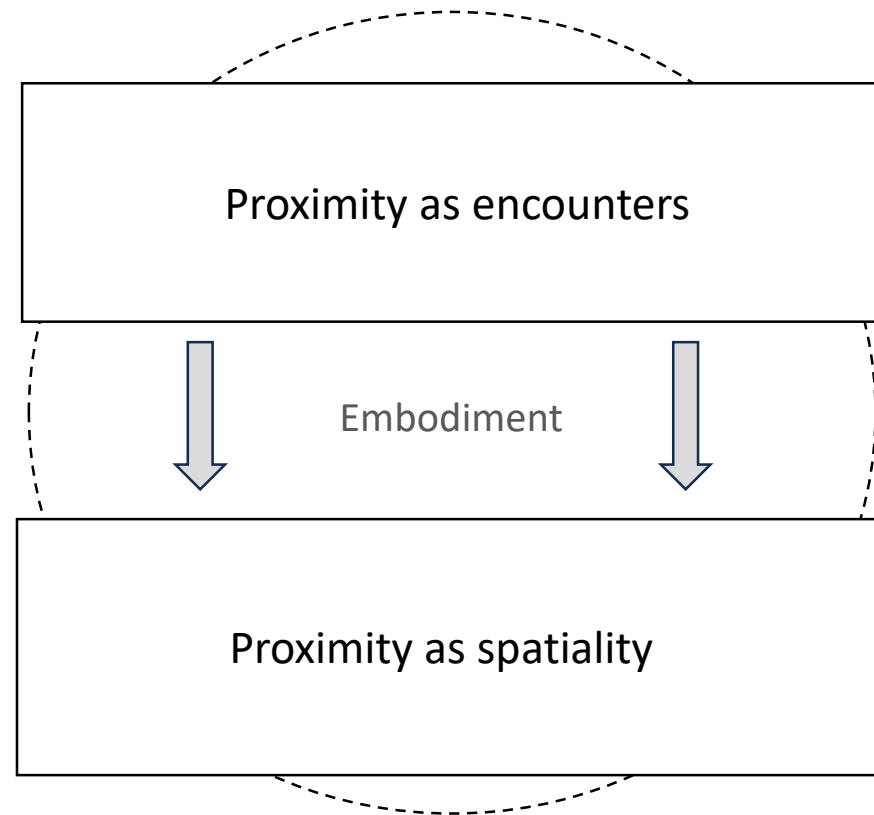


Research question

What kinds of practices and approaches do social workers employ when they encounter and support people in and from disaster contexts?



Proximity as a method of social work in disasters



Proximity as:

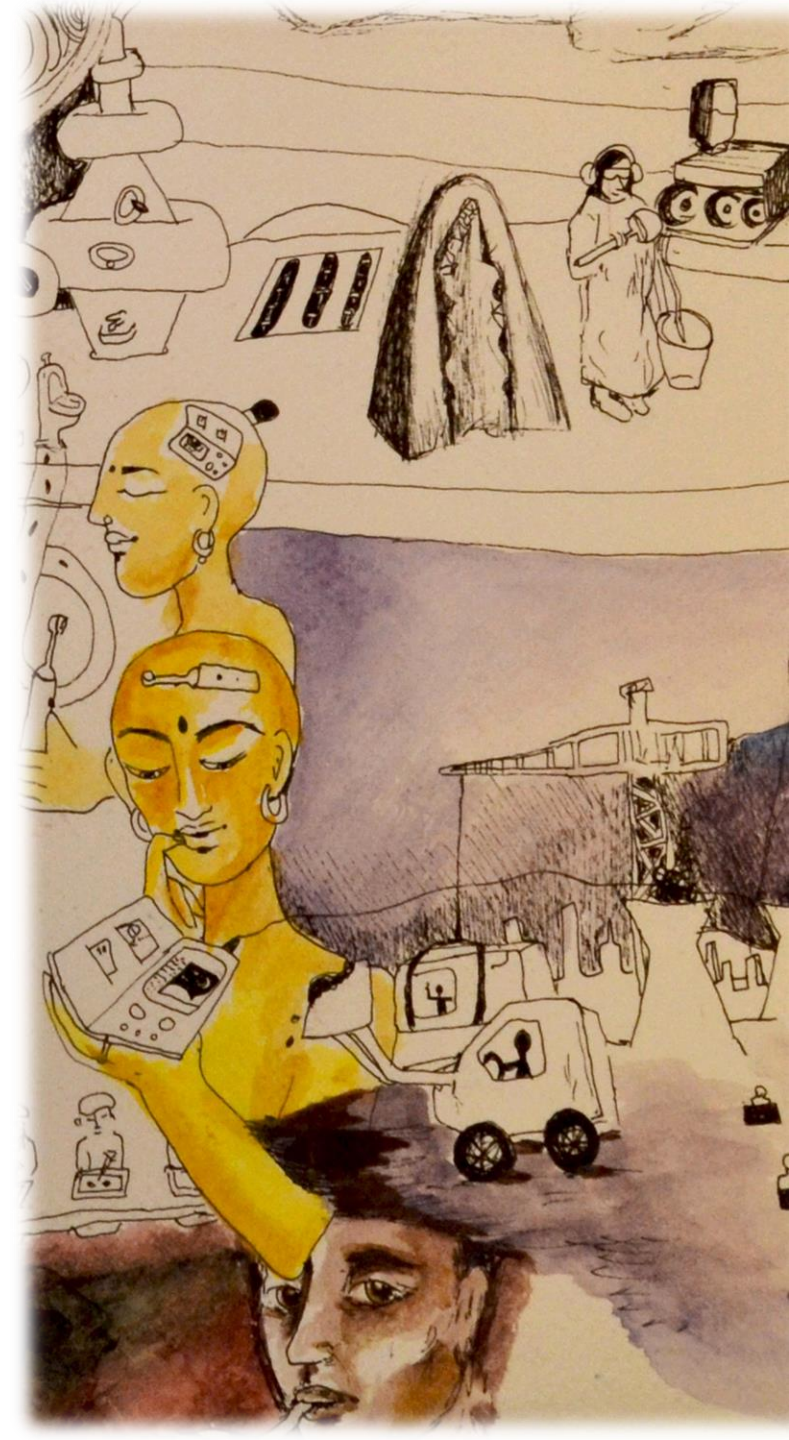
Encounters	Spatiality
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Not prioritising an authority role• Human-centred and humane approach• Non-verbal communication and inter-bodily presence• Providing time and space• Normalising, stabilising and earthing• Attachment and adherence	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Navigating chaotic conditions and unpredictability• Creating safe spaces• Social workers' mobility• Disaster-affected people's mobility• Embracing holisticity

[---] there was this 15 years old girl who had come from there [a conflict zone] without guardians, without anyone she knew, by a flight to Finland [---]. And we needed to proceed with all that border security formalities. She didn't have a residence permit or any document that she could enter Finland with and there was the Border Guard that registered her as an asylum seeker. But why I was involved in the process was because she was a minor. [---] We tried to tell her what's going on but naturally she was really scared of the authorities. Especially the men from the Border Guard with uniforms and weapons. She was so so hysterical, and I thought that my most important job was to be physically present, that she was in my arms for almost two hours. And I thought that was the most important task for me; to calm down and stabilise and be in it, to be there and be her safety.

Social worker 4



--- Social work in disasters
requires conceptual and
practical approaches that
deconstruct definitions based
on national and institutional
borders ---





KIITOS, THANK YOU!

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