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Buddhist temple communities reduce disaster risk for Auckland's Thai and Cambodian immigrants

Faith-based institutions bind communities together and offer resilience against disaster. How, specifically, can they assist disaster risk reduction (DRR) among urban immigrant communities in developed countries? Are there any barriers to, or limits on, that assistance? A recent article investigated the potential and actual DRR roles of Buddhist temples among Thai and Cambodian communities in Auckland.**

Immigrant communities everywhere are often hard to reach by mainstream, main-language DRR resources and turn first to their own community institutions. Moreover, although less earthquake-prone than much of New Zealand, Auckland is vulnerable to storms and floods – worsened by climate change and sea-level rise – and potentially to tsunamis and volcanic eruptions. Asian migrants, including perhaps half the country's 8,000-plus Thais and slightly more Cambodians, make up 23% of this super-diverse city, and the number is climbing fast.

Over 2017 and 2018 the researchers interviewed six Thais and six Cambodians immersed in, and knowledgeable about, their Auckland communities. They sought to understand how temples might assist members to prepare for, respond to, and recover from a disaster and any relevant barriers or limits.

The research applied social capital theory. Social capital is a resource derived from how people, communities and organisations connect in their shared interests. It bonds members within a community, bridges gaps between communities (for instance, fellow Thais/Cambodians with different faiths) and links to structures like external DRR entities.

Findings showed temples assisted preparedness partly by disseminating information. One had translated an official Civil Defence Household Emergency Checklist and Emergency Plan into Khmer (Cambodia's official language) and distributed it. Emergency kits had also been distributed. Temples could reach members through native-language newsletters, Facebook pages and radio programmes. One such programme helped Auckland listeners prepare for a severe storm and flooding in 2018.

As shown during that storm, during disaster response temple committees could quickly reach members via phone

and Facebook. Temples also offered refuge and handed out stores of donated supplies.

Regarding the recovery phase, interviewees emphasised refuge and supplies again, and spiritual support through preaching, counselling and communal meditation.

Yet, assistance also ran up against certain barriers and limits, especially on bridging and linking. First, some temple committeees and monks could not communicate effectively with authorities. And ironically, youngsters who spoke fluent English often knew insufficient Khmer or Thai to translate technical information for their elders.

Moreover, Cambodian temples were split along both home-country political lines and a specific rift over financial management. And while comparatively conflict-free, Auckland's three Thai Buddhist temples served different functions and areas, and none catered to Christian and Muslim minorities. These divisions would impede any mainstream DRR activities that lumped all Cambodian or Thai Buddhists together.

This research is unique in focusing on immigrant communities and alerting agencies like Auckland Council with its official Community Empowerment Approach to subtle pitfalls of relying either homogenously or too heavily on these nevertheless-crucial faith-based institutions. Understanding nuance turns out to be the key.

** The full study results are available in an article authored by Chanrith Ngin, Jesse Hession Grayman, Andreas Neef and Nichapat Sanunsilp: "The role of faith-based institutions in urban disaster risk reduction for immigrant communities". Natural Hazards, published 9 May 2020. [Doi.org/10.1007/s11069-020-03988-9](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11069-020-03988-9).

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