



ISSUE BRIEF

Reconstructing after disasters: Build back better

Ministerial Roundtable

I. Stock taking

Historically, and even in recent events, when a community is struck by a disaster, a speedy return to the status quo is often hoped for. But one of the most significant lessons of the last few decades has been that simply rebuilding communities to pre-disaster standards will recreate the vulnerabilities that existed earlier and expose them to continuing devastation from future disasters. Over the years there has been an appreciation that reconstruction is an opportunity to build back better. Today recovery is defined as the restoration and improvement of facilities, livelihoods and living conditions of disaster-affected communities, including efforts to reduce disaster risk factors.

This “build back better” approach first gained global attention during the reconstruction of Aceh, Indonesia, following the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami. While building back better has been defined in many ways, at its core, it advocates for the restoration of communities and assets in a manner that makes them less vulnerable to disasters and strengthens their resilience. The Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) called for the ‘incorporation of disaster risk reduction’ measures into post-disaster recovery and rehabilitation processes and use opportunities during the recovery phase to develop capacities that reduce disaster risk in the long term’. The concept was further promoted through the International Recovery Platform, and the annual International Recovery Forum. The Global Platforms on Disaster Risk Reduction and the World Reconstruction Conferences 1 (in 2011) and 2 (in 2014) have consolidated the experiences given a higher profile to the concept of build back better.

Resilient recovery and reconstruction are now recognized as imperative for sustainable development. To maintain a path toward sustainability, recovery and reconstruction programs require predictable technical and financial resource commitments for planning, implementation, and performance management. Additionally, at national levels, governments must have the capacity to develop policies and mechanisms that ensure integration of disaster risk reduction in recovery and reconstruction efforts. According to the 2007-2013 *Hyogo Framework of Action Monitor*, while many countries have successfully introduced policies to integrate disaster risk reduction in recovery planning, they often encounter difficulty during implementation.

To be successful, recovery and reconstruction programs require high levels of political commitment and strong institutional frameworks, which provide greater opportunity for promoting risk reduction and building resilience, as well as a greater chance for recovery and reconstruction to be implemented in an efficient and effective manner that avoids negative consequences. Deliberations on a post-2015 framework for disaster risk reduction have highlighted “build back better” as a key priority. This brief presents a concept of resilient recovery: what it is; why it is important; and what measures communities, countries, and regions can adopt to ensure that efficient and effective recovery leads to sustainable development.

II. Overview

Recovery represents much more than a return to the pre-event state. Recovery affords impacted communities with the chance to not only reduce risk from the precipitating hazard, but also from other hazards and conditions that have no bearing on the recent event yet still threaten the community. Recovery actions can also promote both physical and economic resilience, and prompt or facilitate investment in infrastructure upgrades and urban revitalization.

Resilient recovery and reconstruction can be realized through a variety of strategies: enhancing preparedness; relocating critical facilities to safer areas; integrating disaster risk reduction measures into infrastructure improvements; strengthening governance structures, including the development of institutional mandates for disaster risk management; using the reconstruction process to address urban planning challenges; and establishing predictable contingent financing mechanisms, including disaster risk financing.

Recovery needs to be viewed holistically - as part of a continuum, inseparable from preparedness, response, mitigation, and sustainable development. Moreover, recovery must be approached in a cyclical nature wherein actions to strengthen resilience are taken both before and after disasters occur – rather than a linear approach that limits recovery action to the aftermath of an event.

Difficulties exist in planning recovery before a disaster, since exact places, scales and consequences of future disasters have uncertainties. However, government systems can be strengthened in advance of a disaster through contingency plans, institutional arrangements, and the establishment of resource allocation systems, which are needed in full functionality after disasters.

In that vein, the single most effective decision a community or country can make to ensure efficient and effective recovery is to strengthen government systems for recovery before a disaster strikes, through pre-disaster recovery planning. During much of the actual recovery period, many decisions will require split-second action that allows little or no time for analysis. A pre-disaster plan or strategy outlining overarching goals and objectives can help guide post-disaster planning, and reduce the likelihood of ad-hoc behaviors or decisions. It can ensure that pre-existing vulnerabilities are addressed and disaster risks are reduced.

Despite ongoing and expanding efforts to minimize hazard impacts through disaster risk reduction, the recovery function remains relevant and necessary given that catastrophic events continue to occur at an alarming frequency. The exacerbating effects of climate change and urbanization are just two of the many factors that are compounding the risk profiles of countries.

Post-disaster recovery is often plagued by significant time-gaps, a lack of continuous attention by international and national partners, and declining resource commitments. Often, momentum tends to slow down following post-disaster assessments, making it hard to plan and implement later stages of recovery and reconstruction. Even with so many capacity building efforts, nations still face serious limitations in terms of planning and implementing recovery processes.

Recovery actions manifest most visibly when formal emergency response measures begin winding down. Having exhausted the potential to save lives and limit damage, communities then face the long process of regaining what was lost. Those facilitating recovery should balance the desire of a community to return to normalcy with the longer-term goal of reducing risk and vulnerability.

Recovery and reconstruction is an opportunity to remedy pre-existing problems and avoid, or mitigate the impact of, recurrences. Timely and efficient technical and financial resource mobilization is required to support build back better after a disaster, and national and local governments play a pivotal role in ensuring these recovery efforts are effectively planned, managed, coordinated and include measures for reducing disaster risks.

III. Way forward

Disaster recovery can be complex involving communities, local authorities, business, national central governments and at times international organizations and partners. Yet as governments develop their capacity to conduct long-term disaster recovery planning and implementation, the most disaster-impacted regions of the world will experience significant and sustained benefits. Communities will face reduced exposure, and economic growth will experience greater resilience from the shocks of disruption due to disasters. Enhanced engagement with governments, bilateral and multilateral development organizations, disaster recovery experts, civil society, and the private sector will help make implementation a reality.

Global studies at the regional, national, and local levels indicate that the capacity of governments to plan and perform recovery needs further strengthening. When disasters happen, governments need reliable access to a wide range of technical expertise. This may come from within their own ranks or from other sectors (private or nonprofit). All nations stand to benefit from an increase in capacities for recovery and pre-disaster recovery planning. The post-2015 framework for disaster risk reduction is expected to provide a broad template toward which governments may align their recovery planning and operational capacity development goals.

Implementation necessitates a highly context-specific approach shaped by factors that are unique to each region, each country, and each community. Over the years the body of knowledge gained through global experience with major disasters offers a number of key guiding recommendations to support “build back better.” The following measures should be considered when assessing a way forward for the post-2015 framework for disaster risk reduction:

- Building greater financial resilience and predictability within government to manage and respond to disaster triggered by natural hazards, and formalized strategic and resource commitments toward recovery planning, implementation and performance management;
- Promoting the institutionalization of post disaster assessments and national recovery frameworks to enhance risk governance, ensure recovery readiness; strengthen coordination of governments, civil society, multi-laterals and other, and; increase efficient and effective recovery and reconstruction operations;
- Strengthening capacity for recovery planning and monitoring at the national, local, and community level, and establishing clear roles and responsibilities for all actors in a recovery setting, including national and local governments, private sector, academia, and civil society organizations;
- Strengthening mechanisms for cooperation with services in areas of recovery and reconstruction that include sharing rosters of experts, capacity building, tools, bi-lateral support between countries, progress monitoring; and standardized approaches for post-disaster assessments and recovery planning frameworks;
- Development of national and international policy standards for informing and guiding disaster recovery strategies;
- Maintaining an institutional continuum between preparedness, response, recovery, mitigation and sustainable development measures.