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Advance recovery measures assume that a crisis event will occur and cause damage no matter what preparations have been undertaken, and that recovery measures will be necessary.

Douglas Ahlers, Arnold M. Howitt and Herman B. “Dutch” Leonard suggest what can be done to get ready for disaster recovery.

Preparing in advance for disaster recovery



In the past decade, the world has looked in horror at many heart-wrenching scenes of human suffering and physical devastation in Asia – including the tsunami of 2004, China’s earthquake of 2008, Pakistan’s floods of 2010, and Japan’s earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear accident this year. Unfortunately, these will not be the last of such tragic events, given Asia’s significant exposure to natural disasters, increasingly complex and interdependent social and economic systems, intensifying urbanisation in risk-exposed locations, and its vulnerability to the impact of climate change.

Facing such threats, many countries and international organisations have given increased attention to disaster preparedness. Their most common focus is prevention and mitigation, which aim to change the character of the event itself and preparation for post-disaster response to save lives and minimise property loss. While necessary, these steps are insufficient to meet the challenges of major disasters. No matter how effective prevention, mitigation, and preparation for response are, catastrophic events cause widespread physical destruction and disrupt

economic and social life. Their impact inevitably lingers on for years. Therefore, governments, the people affected, and international aid givers face difficult, long-term challenges of disaster recovery.

We contend that governments in high-risk areas can take steps in advance of a catastrophe to make rebuilding faster, less expensive, and more complete. Recovery is typically regarded as something that cannot be started until after disaster has struck; but in the aftermath of disaster, it is highly valuable to have in place a basic framework about how to organise, build support for, finance, and carry out recovery operations – so that action can begin quickly and public confidence can be secured. What we call advance recovery, though far less commonly discussed, is a vital, third form of disaster preparedness.

What actions might this entail?

Structures and Capabilities: Disaster recovery will make intense demands on both central and local government authorities, each of which will have to make significant changes in its ordinary ways of organising and carrying out operations. Access to funding for recovery will become a key problem

because at a time of high need for funds, tax revenue is likely to decline and confidence in the credit-worthiness of the government may be very weak. Government budget allocations will likely have to change to funnel funds into restoration and reconstruction, and financial management practices may need to be strengthened in order to handle and account for inflows of funds from international donors. Government structures may need to be adapted to focus and coordinate recovery efforts, perhaps including a new agency to oversee recovery in the disaster zone. Decision-making and management practices will have to be streamlined – for example, for construction project approvals, permitting, and safety inspections, and for government procurement.

These steps can be framed before disaster strikes. Provisions for emergency financing can be developed. Plans can be made for what a post-disaster government would look like and how it would function; and necessary legislation and administrative regulations to allow these procedures to be implemented in a declared emergency can be approved in advance. If they are not, post-disaster action



Sichuan earthquake

may well be delayed in the midst of complex emergency response operations, disrupted government processes, and grieving.

Generating optimism about the future

Steps to instil confidence in the future viability of the disaster area are a crucial element of recovery. In most countries, no matter how generously government or outside donors provide disaster aid, the vast majority of expenditures to rebuild will be made by individuals and businesses, either from savings or by “sweat equity.” But should a family invest savings and effort in restoring their home? Should a business seek to rebuild? The decisions of any particular family or firm will crucially depend on what they think are the likely decisions of other families or businesses – and such judgments will have to be made without being certain about what others will do. To promote robust recovery in the aftermath of disaster, therefore, government has to create optimistic expectations about the ultimate prospects of recovery; it must be ready quickly to take actions that will convince residents, investors, and aid

givers to believe in the future. Otherwise individuals and businesses will hold back in committing their own resources, many may decide to move elsewhere, and recovery will grind on slowly or falter.

To do this, government needs capacity for coordinating public statements by national leaders and local counterparts so that those affected by the disaster as well as other stakeholders inside and outside of the country gain confidence that leadership is committed and effectively mobilised to make recovery work. Government must be prepared quickly to launch recovery by describing in some specificity the steps and structures that will be operating. Special effort must be devoted to communicating with the sources of financing for recovery – banks and international donors – so they will have sufficient confidence in the direction and management of recovery to commit necessary loans and grants. While the details of such communications cannot be devised until after a catastrophic event, the framework for taking these steps and even drafts of communications can be thought through and prepared ahead of time.

Setting goals and managing conflict

Inevitably, disasters are political events as well as physical and human tragedies. After a likely initial period of national unity and resolve, individuals or groups may be criticised for perceived failures of preparedness or response; differences are bound to emerge over future choices and actions; authorities may be perceived to be moving too slowly; and disagreements over priorities or financing may emerge within levels of government or between central and local institutions. These political pitfalls can slow recovery and diminish confidence. To minimise the possibilities of debilitating political disagreements, mechanisms for developing broad recovery goals, mobilising and aligning support for these goals, and managing conflicts about priorities must be thought through. Plans should be made for providing ample post-disaster opportunities for stakeholders to be heard and participate, for transparent decision-making, and for feedback on implementation as well as in decision-making.

Preparing for recovery in advance of a disaster can be a crucial form of preparedness. Nothing can eliminate the grim difficulties of recovery from tragic circumstances; but advance recovery steps can make the process

proceed more quickly, more completely, at lower cost, and with less political conflict than would be the case if government gave no thought to this need until after the dust of disaster had cleared.

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