

UNDP and the Indian Ocean Tsunami Recovery

Post Disaster Recovery: Main Characteristics



Recurrent natural disasters disrupt economic, political and social systems and contribute to a steady and increasing erosion of development gains in a growing number of countries. Increasing disaster loss will seriously compromise and undermine the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals unless decisive action is taken to reduce disaster risk

At the same time, disasters offer unique, though transient, opportunities for change. When appropriate technical support is provided early to recovery efforts, risk management and reduction considerations can be factored into all recovery initiatives from the beginning, avoiding the reconstruction of risk and addressing the underlying causes.

Conventional approaches to recovery often fail to grasp these opportunities:

- Response to disasters is still dominated by humanitarian assistance and emergency management. While vital to mitigate loss of life and suffering, emergency relief does not address the underlying causes that resulted in the disaster, nor does it automatically stimulate rapid recovery.
- The long time spans required for the necessary impact studies, the design of programmes and projects, the negotiation of multilateral loans for reconstruction and the timeframe for the approval of development funding generates a *gap* between the ending of humanitarian assistance and the initiation of reconstruction programming in which affected people are usually left without support for recovery
- Reconstruction is frequently conceptualised and designed to return a country to the conditions of the *normal* development it enjoyed before a disaster occurred. This too often leads to *rebuilding* the conditions of risk which existed before the disaster, thus preparing the ground for future disasters and possibly contributing to increase the country's debt levels with large reconstruction loans.
- Similarly, during the *gap*, people begin to recover spontaneously, rebuilding and reproducing conditions even more risk prone than those that existed before the disaster occurred.
- In some cases, the longer-term reconstruction never gets off the ground, or is considerably delayed because of the lack of execution capacity in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, political obstacles to loan agreements, a lack of donor interest in funding longer-term recovery and reconstruction, or the outbreak of new crises. This prolongs the *gap* until the next disaster occurs.
- Support to recovery by government organisations, international agencies, NGO's and others is often done through isolated and uncoordinated interventions, leading to a duplication of efforts in some areas, gaps in others and again a failure to factor in risk reduction considerations.
- Too often, societies affected by a major disaster tend to seek rapid and visible solutions to restore normalcy, frequently at the cost of more sustainable and durable solutions that truly address the root causes of the disaster. There is a high risk that in the haste usually associated with the return to normalcy, the "tyranny of rush" works against grasping the opportunities for change, risk reduction and sustainable development.

As the combined cost of crisis loss, humanitarian assistance and reconstruction investment becomes unsustainable; clearly a new approach is required. Experiences have shown that if efforts are made to support local and national recovery processes at an early stage, if risk and vulnerability reduction considerations are factored into all recovery activities and if co-ordination is improved, then it is possible to close the *gap* between relief and reconstruction and transform crisis into opportunities for sustainable development

Sustainable Recovery: the UNDP approach for post disaster recovery

The International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR) defines recovery as the “*decisions and actions taken after a disaster with a view to restoring or improving the pre-disaster living conditions of the stricken community, while encouraging and facilitating necessary adjustments to reduce disaster risk*”.

Recovery is therefore about shifting focus from saving lives to restoring livelihoods, effectively preventing the recurrence of disasters and harnessing conditions for future development. The ensuing transition process will require restoring trust and confidence as much as regaining human and physical developing capital. Managing recovery will require building national capacities, restoring coping mechanisms, empowering communities and determining root causes and vulnerabilities which make societies disaster-prone.

Recovery should be conceived as an integral part of an ongoing developmental process at all levels: national, regional and local. Recovery thus focuses on how best to restore the capacity of the government and communities to rebuild and recover from disasters and to prevent relapses. The opportunity should be seized to reduce development deficits of the affected areas and not to simply replace the damaged infrastructure.

The recovery process can also improve the institutional and legislative systems in place to manage and reduce disaster risk, including the broader management functions such as leadership, planning, organising, developing and controlling disaster preparedness and response, risk management and reduction.

The UNDP approach to sustainable recovery is guided by the recognition that capacities, activities and approaches designed on the ground as early as possible can mould recovery as an opportunity to initiate a process that transforms as it repairs. Disaster risk reduction and the promotion of development that is participatory and equitable are at the heart of the sustainability sought in any sound recovery programme. Considering the recurrent nature of many natural hazards, capacity building should always guide recovery actions, even in ad-hoc interventions.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A SUSTAINABLE RECOVERY

This approach, has the following characteristics:

- 1. Improving the living conditions of the affected communities and sectors**
Recovery activities should contribute to improving the living conditions of the affected communities and sectors through the revival of production (agriculture, industry), trade and services, and the creation of income-generation/employment opportunities. The goal should go beyond the simple restoration of pre-disaster levels, but aim towards the creation of more sustainable livelihoods for the population.
- 2. Building local and national capacities for increased resilience, risk management and sustainable development**
Achieving the goal of building local and national capacities implies that external technical assistance must complement existing capacities, be conceived as supportive and not directive, and must entail transfer of technology, know-how and capacities for increased resilience, risk management and sustainable development.
- 3. Demonstrative Effects**
Local recovery initiatives may have important demonstration effects, building local and national capacities and piloting approaches that can then be factored into national development programmes
- 4. Taking advantage of ongoing initiatives**
The recovery process represents an opportunity to review on-going development initiatives and re-orient as necessary and feasible in order to contribute to building resilience and capacities in the affected communities. As a minimum, ongoing initiatives should be reviewed to ensure that they do not contribute to the further accumulation of risk.
- 5. Improving/maintaining coordination**
The aftermath of a major disaster is frequently characterised by a multiplicity of actors, national and international, promoting and initiating recovery activities. Coordination and information sharing thus become even more essential to avoid duplications and gaps and to optimise the resources available for sustainable recovery.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A SUSTAINABLE RECOVERY (Part 2)

6. Promoting participatory approaches and decentralised planning and programming for recovery

Recovery programming must be made on the basis of a sound, participatory assessment of needs and capacities of the affected population, so that the local initiative, resources and capacities are fully understood and utilised. It must be demand driven and designed to reach the most vulnerable population.

7. Gender sensitivity

The recovery process is an opportunity to reduce the vulnerability of social groups and increase gender equality. Particular attention should be paid in the assessment, planning and programming stages for recovery, to the vital role that women play as community members and leaders, their contribution to the livelihoods sector especially through the informal channels and the special problems they face, such as property rights and being heads of households in particularly difficult circumstances

8. Enhancing safety standards and integrating risk reduction in reconstruction and development

All recovery programmes and proposals must aim at improving safety standards and reducing risk, avoiding the danger of rebuilding previous vulnerabilities or creating new risks. This brings the need for risk assessment to the forefront of recovery planning requirements.

9. Mainstreaming disaster risk reduction in the recovery/development process

The integration of risk reduction concerns into all aspects and proposals of the redevelopment process is essential to achieve the overarching goal of sustainable recovery. A small window of opportunity usually exists for this integration to take place in the aftermath of a major disaster, in several fronts. Firstly the recovery process must be backed by an approved government policy, an enabling national system, the appropriate tools and the advocacy among all the actors including civil society.

10. Monitoring, evaluating and learning

Recovery programmes and plans must include appropriate, participatory monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that allow timely implementation of corrective measures, capturing the experience and the voices of the target population, building on the demonstrative effects, increasing effectiveness and learning.

To summarise, UNDP Sustainable Recovery offers an approach with the potential to:

- Close the *gap* between relief and reconstruction;
- To break the downward spiral of unsustainable development and crisis and facilitate a sustainable reduction in vulnerabilities and risks;
- Improve co-ordination between a wide range of local, regional, national and international partners;
- Build on existing social and human resources enabling a rapid recovery of livelihoods and development, with relatively small financial inputs
- Build capacities and demonstrate approaches that can be applied at a larger scale.
- Provide a flexible approach, evolving in terms of interventions and programs from situation to situation that seeks to address the immediate needs of recovery and the long-term requirements of development.
- Respond to situations, which call for a critical mass of interventions, aiming at rapid recovery and the restoration of normal and enhanced conditions of development.

More information

- UNDP Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery – Disaster Reduction Unit
<http://www.undp.org/bcpr/disred/index.htm>
- Reducing Disaster Risk – UNDP Publication
<http://www.undp.org/bcpr/disred/rdr.htm>