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THE RECOVERY PERIOD IN U.S. DISASTERS:  
PROBLEMS AND OPPORTUNITIES\*

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A number of important trends have surfaced which affect disaster recovery. An increase in federal involvement in both the types of events and the range of services provided, a move to make prevention a part of recovery and to plan more systematically for recovery, and an attempt to counteract federal government expansion by returning to state governments responsibilities in certain areas of response are among current trends in disaster recovery. This paper outlines the difficulties inherent in defining the recovery period: its beginning and its meaning. It discusses trends apparent at state and local levels, and it deals with the different impacts of disaster and recovery on individuals, households, organizations and communities.

#### The Nature of "Recovery"

What is the recovery period after disaster? Presumably, the recovery period is that time following disaster impact after immediate emergency needs have been met but before the impacted community has returned to routine operations and activities. At first glance, many might consider this answer self-evident. However, any thought given to the question of recovery period quickly generates a number of difficulties.

1. How are the limits of the recovery period delineated; when does it start and stop? According to law, tradition and custom, if the post-disaster impact period is defined as the emergency period, many services are provided free for the asking. If this post-impact period is defined as recovery rather than emergency, what many organizations can and will do in terms of aid to disaster victims changes. On the other hand, when is the recovery period over? At what point should the problems that are present be thought of as outcomes of the usual dynamics of social life? Since recovering from a disaster is presumably something other than normal, social change, different philosophies, different organizations and different outcomes would be involved in the recovery period.

2. What should be the objective of recovery; how is it to be brought about? The objective might be either restoration or rehabilitation. Restoration is putting the impacted individuals, households, organizations or communities in the same order as before the disaster. Rehabilitation is raising the impacted entities to some appropriate level which may be different than before the disaster. The issue here has long plagued the American National Red Cross in its efforts to provide relief: should families be assisted to their pre-disaster standard of living, or should families be assisted to an adequate level which, in some cases, might be either below or above the pre-disaster level. Of course, the issue is not one peculiar to the Red Cross; it is one that any organization involved in recovery might consider and decide. There is also the matter of the strategy to be employed in recovery. Assistance can be provided directly to individual victims, or help might be given for organizational recovery so that it can indirectly contribute to the recovery of individual victims. Damaged businesses might be given aid so they can reopen and provide employment, or unemployment compensation can be given to the disaster-created unemployed. While the issue is never patently an either/or proposition, priorities must be assigned since only so much aid is available.

From our perspective, it is best not to define recovery in terms of a time period or an objective, but to define it in terms of activities. Recovery refers to conscious, disaster-linked, non-emergency activities which would not otherwise have been undertaken. This perspective reflects the fact that a disaster and its duration is not a unitary phenomena but is one which varies depending upon the entities involved. For some groups, disaster recovery is long; for others, it is short.

#### Some Important Trends Affecting Disaster Recovery

In the last two or three decades, some trends have developed which must be considered in any description or analysis of preparations for, responses to

and recovery from disasters in American society. It would be impossible to list them all in this paper. Those noted below are some of the major trends that have particular significance for the post-disaster recovery period.

1. The United States government has increased its involvement in disasters by expanding the range of happenings it designates as a disaster or major emergency. For example, some seasonal misfortunes, such as fruit crop failures due to frost and disruption of transportation due to heavy snowfall have been defined in part as the responsibility of the federal government. More recently, very diffuse, technologically-related, chronic dangers such as the toxic poisoning of the Love Canal, have seen federal involvement. The federal government's intervention into a variety of hazardous and disruptive events stems in part from initiative by federal agencies themselves and in part from pressure by local communities and state governments. As the range of events and situation to be covered by the federal disaster agency (FEMA) indicates, a great number of both acute and chronic crises have been classified as "disasters."

2. There has been an increase in the types of disaster-related services provided at the national level. In late 1978, FDAA commissioned a "compendium of federal programs for natural disaster recovery"; its initial incomplete survey found 113 different programs. Furthermore, assistance has been extended to more kinds of recipients: to different categories of actual or possible victims, to public and private organizations or to various governmental entities. Too, the complex of recovery programs has cut across other non-disaster related programs and legislation resulting in administrative complications. In consequence, multiple recovery programs exist and their initiation and implementation have been done with very little thought to the total recovery picture.

3. In recent years, federal agencies have attempted to make prevention a part of recovery. In helping communities to recover from a disaster, encouragement and assistance to take steps to prevent or mitigate future disasters have

given. Land use measures and the purchase of insurance typify this encouragement. There have also been threats to withhold disaster assistance from those localities which have not taken precautions to protect themselves, especially if they have had prior disaster experience. While it seems highly unlikely that humanitarian and political considerations would ever permit a federal agency to withhold aid at time of disaster, the talk of doing so is a weapon some are using to forge a stronger link between recovery from one disaster and prevention or preparation for another.

4. There have been some vague moves at the federal level towards recovery planning. Title VIII of the federal law -- Economic Recovery -- makes elaborate provisions for a systematic, organized post-disaster recovery program. While these provisions have not yet been implemented, their very existence follows years of discussion on the idea that recovery need not be viewed as an ad hoc production. If nothing else, this reflects thinking which is prevalent in some agencies at the national level.

5. In contrast to the just discussed expansionist tendencies at the federal level, there are some operative countertrends. For instance, there have been increasing attempts by some federal agencies to decentralize post-disaster responses and to put greater responsibility for recovery efforts on state and local governments. This move has been dictated partly by a desire to decrease federal post-disaster costs, to shift responsibility from the federal government and partly to recognize the populist philosophy that delivery agencies and programs are most effective when they are closer to the people they serve. In particular, recent attempts have been made in Wisconsin and Arkansas to put the provision of temporary housing for disaster victims in the hands of state governments.

6. New trends are forming at the state and local levels as well, including a recent updating and improving of most state disaster plans. The majority

of these plans still do not provide for long run recovery; however, they have improved, on paper at best, the immediate emergency response efforts. The better these are, the fewer problems there will be with recovery activities. In addition to the revision of state disaster plans, major work on disaster planning has been undertaken by several state government groups. The work of the National Governors' Association has specifically addressed the issue of recovery and the possible linkage between mitigation measures and recovery steps.

7. The involvement of non-emergency and non-governmental groups in disaster has also grown. Although religious organizations have always responded to disasters, this effort became systematic and collective only in recent years. The very meeting for which this paper has been prepared indicates a more systematic and organized approach by religious groups with respect to disasters.

8. Although this discussion has centered on trends being followed at governmental levels, there are two additional phenomena reflective of changes in American society as a whole which merit mention. One is a broad movement away from dependence on self, family or personally known resources toward dependency on assistance from organized groups. The other is an aspect of the growing consumer movement. Not only are more people expecting macro level assistance, but expectations are rising for more in the way of assistance, particularly, it seems, with regard to disaster recovery. Increased demand, with its concomitant of increased criticism, will in all likelihood have significant impact on recovery planning and activity.

#### Recovery Impact at Four Levels of Society

Before going into some of the problems that face individuals, households, organizations and communities during the recovery period, the concept of "problem" should be defined. In this paper, "problem" is viewed in a more neutral light; that is, as a situation in which there is potential for both positive and negative change. Change is the essence of the recovery period. It is true that

the extent and speed of change diminishes over time and with it, many opportunities. Old patterns reassert themselves and new non-disaster demands arise, causing a shift in priorities, but new patterns may have arisen in the crisis.

Interestingly, in Chinese, the character for "crisis" is identical to the one for "opportunity." Crisis theory has often been applied in the disaster context, usually in reference to social/psychological problems of victims, but it has relevance to the situations of larger units of society as well. Briefly stated, this theory states that an entity, be it a person or a group, goes about its business in ways learned to be reasonably successful; however, when an event occurs that has elements of threat, loss and challenge, normal problem-solving mechanisms are found to be inadequate. The entity thus becomes disorganized, entering a state of fluidity from which it eventually reorganizes and resumes functioning. Depending on the resources it can marshal, from with or without, the capacities for problem-solving may decrease or remain similar to previous capacities, but may also have the potential to increase; that is, become stronger for having learned additional ways of coping.

This can be applied to any of the four levels of society on which we are focusing. There are negative forces, arising out of failure in problem-solving mechanisms that can result in backward movement. There are persons or forces which favor only a return to "normalcy" and thus also approach problems negatively as obstacles to be overcome. But there are also those forces which aspire to improvement of pre-existing social, technical or economic levels and see problems as opportunities for growth so that problem-solving capacities are increased. This is not an argument for impulsiveness or reaction, certainly not for short-term expediency in recovery-related decision making. It is simply a statement of belief that much benefit can be realized post disaster if the potential is recognized and prepared for.

### The Individual

It cannot be categorically stated that mental health problems are a direct result of disaster, since its effects on individuals have not been systematically studied. Research evidence does show, however, that a considerable increase in the types and degrees of stress experienced by members of a stricken community, be they victims or service providers, has led to greater vulnerability and in some cases to actual impairment of social functioning. Serious emotional illness is rare, but many victims and some disaster workers manifest dejection, depression and psychosomatic symptoms for as long as a year and a half post disaster.

The most obvious kinds of stress have to do with major loss--family and friends, property, income and employment, normal routines. Perhaps such losses are felt most sharply soon after impact, but their effects are pervasive and far reaching.

Another complex of stress characterizes the recovery period. It is marked by conflict, frustration, and anxiety centering on the roles that give meaning and structure to life. Much of our current relief system is predicated on recipients assuming a dependent stance, and indeed does not work well for those who do not. Thus, victims can be forced into positions which may run counter to internalized values of self-sufficiency and independence. The acceptance of assistance may insure that primary needs for food, shelter, etc., are satisfied, but it can also deprive the recipient of the means to fulfill secondary needs for status and self-esteem. The resultant frustration and anxiety are a major factor in both the negativism and scapegoating that arise in the recovery period and in the incidence of most disaster-related mental health problems (Mileti, et al, 1975).

Service providers are far from immune to role-related stress. Conflict is inherent in trying to be a "good guy", on one hand, yet meeting the requirements



of formal organizations, on the other (Mileti, et al, 1975). The task is a huge one. In some cases, workers must struggle with jobs for which they are under or over qualified. Too, they may lack necessary resources, or simply have more to do than is humanly possible. In these situations, providers have been known to completely withdraw or to minimize their efforts where these options are available, or to choose the bureaucrat's role over the altruist (or vice versa). (Bates, 1963.) This behavior may solve their immediate conflict but may not necessarily benefit the overall recovery program.

Since the early 1970's, there has been a surge of interest in delivering human services to disaster victims. Private voluntary groups, especially religiously based ones, have focused on meeting combined material, spiritual and emotional needs. The mental health profession has involved itself in crisis intervention programs primarily aimed at meeting psychological needs, with varying degrees of attention being paid to social/economic problems as they contribute to emotional well-being.

To some extent, all of these programs, but especially those funded under Section 413 of the Disaster Relief Act of 1974 and those drawing upon the disaster mental health literature, tend to have a common base in crisis theory and the use of outreach as a casefinding vehicle. On the plus side, crisis intervention serves to prevent actual or potential problems from escalating, while outreach is a means of helping people who might otherwise be unaware of or unable to obtain needed services. However, certain problems are related to these approaches.

When a project is funded, particularly with public money, pressure is exerted to justify it by means of a detailed, quantitatively documented needs assessment. Sometimes this results in inflated estimates of the amounts of service needed, and exaggerated projections of the effects of disaster on various segments of the community. Once the figures are written into a proposal, the

project tends to be stuck with them. Thus, outreach can become an effort aimed more at attaining a magic number, delivering the types of service committed to, rather than searching out those most in need and providing the services required.

Crisis intervention, when couched in mental health terminology and used in the context of mental health delivery, can act as a sort of red herring. Problems are defined and treated as predominantly psychological; that is, internal to the victim, when in actuality they usually seem to arise out of the social and economic circumstances of the recovery period. By focusing too strongly on mental health, attention can be deflected from obtaining basic material resources and from the necessity of improving the organizational structure and delivery of material assistance programs.

#### Families and Households

It is difficult to separate the individual's situation from that of the people with whom he lives. Although the family can act as a buffer to stress, long-term disruptions of critically important living patterns can have a negative impact on all concerned. The consequences of loss of employment, school disturbance, temporary housing, and the like are most clearly seen in family functioning, especially in the recovery period (Mileti, 1975).

Adversity can lead to greater cohesiveness and stability of families if it is not overwhelming; otherwise, it can be divisive and debilitating. Timely help, given in sufficient amounts, can have significant social, financial and psychological payoffs, as well as ethical ones, for the entire community. Unfortunately, most disaster programming is fragmented and specialized in ways that lives are not. What is needed is a wholistic approach which takes into account the complex interrelationships among the types of problems that emerge in the recovery period and their effects on family life -- an approach which

assigns high priority to keeping intact familial family, neighborhood, work place and community living patterns.

We know that certain groups are more vulnerable to disaster impact. Now we are learning that some of these same groups and others are just as vulnerable in the recovery period -- to inequity. These are the aged, children, the poorly educated, members of minority, religious and cultural groups, those who are adverse to accepting charity, those without the skills for dealing with bureaucracy (Mileti, 1975). In recovery, as in many other situations, those who are most isolated - whether physically or socially - those with the fewest resources and those who make the least noise are subject to oversight, discrimination and inequity in the provision of services.

A rather recent phenomenon has further implications for the equity issue. This is the rise of the non-typical household. Somewhat like our income tax laws, disaster legislation and assistance organizations are structured in favor of the nuclear, two-parent family, with traditional and well-defined divisions of labor. Evidence of this can be seen in reimbursement/relief schedules, in eligibility criteria, and through application procedures that assume a certain amount of free time and mobility. What is ignored is the fact that the number of nuclear families is decreasing and is downright rare in certain sections of some cities. There is a growing number of single parent families, one-person households, cohabitators of all ages and sexual preferences, and a variety of other shared living arrangements that, like the groups mentioned earlier, are vulnerable to being overlooked and under-served. Planning and programming that aims at locating and taking the initiative in serving hidden and isolated segments of the population can achieve greater equity in the short run and serve as a vehicle for better integrating these households into the whole fabric of community life.

In this context, the concepts of need versus loss could stand some rethinking. Social welfare systems in this country are almost universally regarded as inefficient, largely maintaining people at subsistence levels and doing little to attack the root causes of poverty and other forms of social distress. Disaster relief could be viewed as a social investment, an opportunity to supply "capital" in amounts sufficient to produce long-term self support, and to redistribute wealth in a way that could help break the cycle of poverty, at least for some.

This is visionary, of course, and probably unpopular, since those who have more, including political power, and who thus have more to gain from continued adherence to the "loss" principle of disaster relief, will resist efforts to change the status quo (Barton, 1969). It has long been a cliché that one of the best things that could happen to an underdeveloped country is to lose a war to the U.S. Is it possible that we could redirect parts of our foreign policy to the "underdeveloped" in our own country?

## The Organization

Organizations' primary recovery period task is to work individually and together to get a job done. The nature of the job varies with the disaster situation; in every case getting the job done requires determining leadership and coordinating tasks. Inherent in these two processes is conflict, which can and does arise at any point, over any issue. Conflicts usually develop when impact subsides and organizations move into the relationships and responsibilities dictated by the recovery effort. Meanwhile, conflicts set aside during the post-impact "honeymoon" period resurface at times more violently than before. Since conflict is a fact of life, to deny it is to lessen the chances of dealing with it constructively.

Leadership problems emerge when the "God role" is assigned, assumed, or aspired to by multiple agencies. Rivalries can erupt and lead to obstructing communications, ignoring orders, turf building. Competitive situations are aggravating and damaging when they arise out of a desire for visibility and enhanced credibility; they are even more difficult to resolve when real functional overlap exists.

Leadership also becomes a problem when outsiders--from higher levels of government or from the private sector--arrive without knowledge of or respect for the local power structure, the indigenous culture and traditional ways of doing things. (Bates, et. al., 1963) The interface between professionals and amateurs is yet another source of conflict. Even when professional disaster workers are committed to limiting their contribution to advice, liason, and other forms of secondary aid, there is potential for inside/outside and professional/amateur division lines.

Management of recovery is complicated by the introduction of new tasks, responsibilities, and intra- and interorganizational relationships, and is exacerbated by shifts in regular personnel and the convergence of volunteers requiring orientation, deployment and supervision. As suggested earlier, the

particulars of who is going to do what; who takes orders from whom; who is going to pay for it; followed closely by who gets the credit; vary from disaster to disaster. There is one thing that might be considered in every case, however. Significant payoffs, in terms of enhanced credibility and power can accrue to organizations that take an active, visible role in disaster response. This, however, is a double-edged sword, for our organization can attract severe criticism just as easily as it can bring praise upon itself. A community stands to gain from organizational contributions, even if such organizations are motivated, to a degree, by self-interest. On the other hand, communities too can lose in the long run. Looking good is not the same as doing good. All too often, organizations define problems in terms of the solutions they can provide. For instance, a mental health agency with valuable counselors defines the problem as a need for counseling; HUD, with trailers available, defines it as a need for trailers. An objective needs assessment, followed by solutions tailored from the whole cloth of available resources might be more difficult and time consuming, but certainly more productive.

Change and fluidity are the essence of disaster and its aftermath. While they engender many of the problems outlined above, they also provide opportunities. Changes already instituted by organizations can be accelerated. Changes long desired can be initiated overnight. Disaster itself may suggest new alternatives and provide the opportunity to evaluate delivery systems. However, as the disaster recedes, the degree of fluidity diminishes and with it opportunities for development, redirection, or new alliances. Full rehabilitative and reconstructive potential cannot be realized without planning and preparation. Finally, in defense of bureaucracies, in spite of their rigid properties, they provide the most efficient means for handling large jobs. As the

spontaneous altruism of the immediate post-disaster period declines, communities need routinized and therefore reliable machines to give aid, independent of what Barton (1969) terms, "the ups and downs of emotion."

### The Community

Many of the demands placed upon organizations similarly face the community as a whole, multiplied geometrically by the size of the community and the scope of the disaster. Again, coordination and leadership are the major issues. Particularly at this level, coordination should be considered within a single phase and between the phases of relief and recovery. (Mileti, 1975)

To reiterate, disaster response is characterized by a plethora of fluidity and change. New organizations form, then dissolve; new relationships develop; personnel shifts; old agencies extend and expand to meet new tasks, then revert eventually to pre-disaster concerns. Various components of the community respond differently to coordinative efforts, depending on leadership and on the time framework. Lead agencies maybe unknown, unrecognized, or without authority sufficient for its responsibilities. Some groups within the community may not know what is being done in terms of coordination. Others may have conflicting agendas, as in the private construction industry which wants to make money, insurance firms and school districts which want to save money, or private charities which have special criteria for distributing relief. (Bates, 1963)

The time framework in which coordination occurs has important consequences for two reasons. One is the fact that a disaster does not have a uniform impact over the entire community. It is over for some much earlier than for others. Different segments of both victim populations and official responders work through relief, recovery and return to normalcy at different rates. There is no single "recovery" period. Coordination between phases is at least

as important to the long term effort as coordination within a single phase.

Because of overlapping phases, relief activities are being conducted at the same time that the administrative structure for recovery is being established. Decisions made early, in the rush to provide prompt relief, to solve immediate problems, can have great impact later. Temporary solutions tend to become permanent ones, especially when the disaster recedes and newer crises take its place. One example of how expediency can undermine long term recovery is the matter of housing. Temporary units do alleviate the immediate plight, but how frequently does this take into account subsequent needs related to school enrollment, transportation to work, shopping, other services, heating and plumbing inadequate for winter needs? At the same time, the quick return of victims to old neighborhoods by means of flood insurance forgiveness clauses and by means of easy money for basic repairs does nothing to encourage desirable relocation, and often results in redevelopment of the flood plain. (Mileti, 1975)

Planning and coordination are further complicated by political jurisdictions and legislative requisites, especially in light of current changes at the federal level. Until the reorganization of federal activity under FEMA is completed, in fact as well as on paper, the rules of the game will be uncertain. With the trend toward decentralization we have and will probably continue to see ambivalence and inconsistency at all levels of government. Last year the National Governor's Conference welcomed the opportunity for more state control. Local officials and some branches of state government have been more cautious, however. What various states do with this new authority remains to be seen.

One area where recovery differs critically from earlier phases of disaster response is in resource availability. The first weeks and months after



disaster see an incredible array of resource contribution and organizational and individual participation. The problems of coordination which have been discussed are at their most chaotic. Eventually though, structures and procedures for delivery are worked out. Ironically, just about this point groups which have emerged or offered their assistance begin dissolving and resuming normal operations. Voluntary contributions dwindle and public expenditures begin to diminish, all resulting in far fewer resources available for reconstruction and recovery.

In smaller disasters material needs can often be met through contributions obtained through the private sector or the Red Cross. In large-scale disasters, further help for sufficient length of time, is crucial in determining the speed, even the achievement of recovery. In such cases the resources of society as a whole may be required, with the amount of wealth to be allocated large and politically significant. For this reason Barton (1969), one of the early observers of communities in disaster, sounds very contemporary when he maintains that loss sharing arrangements are among the most important structural events we have for dealing with disaster.

#### Future Disasters and Their Impact

Recovery problems are not going to diminish nor become simpler in the years ahead. We can expect more frequent and serious disasters, due to technological agents such as chemical hazards, fires in high rise buildings, crowded airways, and also because of a higher concentration of people in vulnerable areas, especially in the flood plains and hurricane and earthquake zones of the sun belt.

We have seen how the same disaster can impact differently on different levels of society, devastating some, hardly affecting others, and economically benefiting some others. Disaster impact will become even more differentiated in the future as American society becomes more heterogeneous and specialized.

Consider, for example, the case of a tornado striking a retirement village as opposed to a luxury resort community as opposed to a typically middle American township. More frequent disasters, more severe disasters, differential and therefore unpredictable impacts, changing legislation, rising expectations--obviously disaster response is going to become increasingly problematic, especially in the recovery period. Organized voluntary groups, as represented by the participants of this conference, can meet a vital need in calling attention to this underdeveloped area of response, as in leading the way toward a broader, more productive cooperation between the public and private sectors on behalf of victims, responsible agencies, and society as a whole.

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