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A BRIEF NOTE ON DISASTER RESTORATION,
RECONSTRUCTION AND RECOVERY:
A COMPARATIVE NOTE USING
POST EARTHQUAKE OBSERVATIONS

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**A Brief Note on Disaster Restoration, Reconstruction and Recovery:
A Comparative Note Using Post Earthquake Observations***

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* This statement was originally prepared in the middle 1990s for inclusion in an electronic digital handbook on disaster research. The producers of the handbook never produced a final product, so we decided to make the statement public in this way. We have not made any attempt to update the references. Our general reading of the recent relevant literature does not seem to be inconsistent with the observations made in the statement we wrote about a decade earlier.

ABSTRACT:

Twenty general observations about disaster restoration, reconstruction and recovery are presented with attention primarily on what happens after earthquakes. Generalizations were derived from the empirical literature on post impact periods of disasters. The overall conclusion is that disaster reconstruction is part of the more general process of recovery, which in turn is rooted in the social structure of the impacted society.

KEYWORDS: Disaster restoration, disaster reconstruction, disaster recovery

INTRODUCTION

These general observations below are derived from comparative analyses of the empirical literature on the post impact period of disasters especially earthquakes, in both developed and developing countries.

Three concepts are differentiated. Restoration assumes that after a disaster the situation is brought back to the original pre-earthquake state. Reconstruction centers on the physical rebuilding of human communities in the post earthquake period. Recovery is the most inclusive term, referring to moving an earthquake impacted community to a healthy state which can include restoration, reconstruction and social change.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The reconstruction and recovery process is always characterized by heightened social conflict. Such conflict has a social base and cannot be avoided. It reflects a clash of different group interests.
2. Social processes after an earthquake will direct the reconstruction along patterns already present before the disaster. Restoration effectively "satisfies" those processes.
3. The reproduction of past patterns is most certain when high status groups are adversely affected. "Success" in reconstruction usually is judged from the top down.
4. This means that the reconstruction process benefits most the socially powerful at the expense of the less powerful. The end result may be justified by allusions to what is good for the "community."
5. Power segment members may vary in terms of social location, status and class. The possible inconsistency among these variables means that there is not necessarily a unified view of that future. During the reconstruction major conflict therefore can develop among elites with different visions of the future.
6. Reconstruction always raises issues of equity. This delays the recovery process since a community is always more than the sum of its buildings.
7. Reconstruction that requires any relocation raises issues of equity in quite visible ways. Since relocation disrupts the community fabric, it delays recovery.
8. The longer the reconstruction process, the slower the recovery of the community since recovery in other dimensions is also slowed.
9. Government policies reinforce the advantage of the most powerful in the reconstruction period. Since the most powerful often are not unified, that means that governmental policies can be inconsistent.
10. Looked at in an international context, the opportunities for increasing seismic safety during reconstruction are greater in centralized societies. Those gains are usually made in the face of increased resident hostility and lengthen the time of community recovery.
11. Opportunities for increasing seismic safety during reconstruction are quite limited in decentralized societies. This would seem to be especially true of residential and industrial reconstruction and perhaps less so with respect to community facilities, such as schools.
12. The most critical determinant of the nature and direction of reconstruction is the banking/financial sector and the relationship of those sectoral institutions to pre and post impact policies of the central bank. In some societies, developers and others in the real estate area might have considerable influence.

13. Economic factors determine the nature and direction of reconstruction more than increased technical and engineering knowledge or by changes in construction standards and land use patterns. But the economic factors themselves are rooted in socio-structural factors such as norms, values and beliefs.
14. Any improvement in seismic safety during the reconstruction period will depend on the presence of such measures in the patterns of community planning prior to the earthquake.
15. There may be a small window of opportunity very early in the reconstruction period for increases in seismic safety. Those openings are usually lost because of delays in collection of technical information.
16. In the future, comprehensive reconstruction planning of earthquake damaged urban areas is not likely. Such planning has not been successful. In the past it has delayed recovery. It has been primarily attempted in centralized societies.
17. Since a totally seismically safe, rationally planned reconstructed community is not likely, it still might be possible to make modest incremental gains, especially through the use of economic controls. Grandiose plans for reconstruction may have to be confined to designing small memorial parks. Such memorials probably will facilitate the recovery process and, therefore, is a useful social innovation.
18. Perhaps the greatest gains might be in some developing countries. This does not mean that issues of equity are not important in such societies or that the powerful will not win. But in many such systems are difficult to identify from "normal" sufferers. An effort to increase seismic safety might produce some marginal increase in the general standard of living, even for those who continue to live in high risk areas.
19. There is actually likely to be greater payoff by focusing on the pre rather than post impact period. Thus improvements are most likely if they are introduced into the pre-disaster development planning of a society.
20. Any discussion of reconstruction must start with the right approach. This requires recognizing that reconstruction is part of the more general process of recovery from disaster. In turn, how recovery proceeds is rooted in the very social structure and fabric of the impacted society. Put another way, reconstruction is less a technical issue than it is a social matter. Reconstruction only partly involves bricks and land use codes. It mostly concerns social values and group interests.

ADDITIONAL READINGS

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