

Disaster Rehabilitation - A People's Centred Perspective

Question 1: Why is people centred recovery important?

It empowers people, it strengthens human spirit and human dignity.

It builds confidence pride and dignity it helps to reduce the helplessness communities initially feel after a disaster. This process can help reduce stress, trauma and depression amongst community members as it keeps people active and working towards improving.

It helps address the real needs in the affected communities

– people understand best their problems, know best what they need and don't need, and are the best ones to solve those problems.

It ensures that assistance goes to those that really need it

and helps facilitate some level of equity. When people lead the relief and rehabilitation processes, it creates more transparency and helps reduce corruption. (“Not everyone who comes to support you after a disaster has good intentions!”)

It enables a faster, cheaper, more equitable and more efficient recovery process,

and is therefore more sustainable. It increases accountability and responsibility. Governments are always slow in responding to disasters, and other outside actors may take advantage of the process.

It not only builds houses but it builds people and communities

– the goal of people-driven disaster rehabilitation is not only to rebuild destroyed houses, but to empower communities and build people.

It enables local people to be the owners of their own recovery process.

In many disaster affected regions where homes were reconstructed without involvement of the community, the people continue to live in the camps or in their ruined homes and not in the new houses because they feel like aliens in those new houses, which a contractor built.

It can help reduce social divisions in disaster affected communities.

By encouraging across-the-spectrum involvement of community members, it can ensure that the most vulnerable and most disadvantaged groups in a community (such as women, children, the elderly, lower caste and minority groups) get involved, get their needs on the table and get equal attention and help. In India, in the rebuilding after earthquakes in Maharashtra and Gujarat and the tsunami in Tamil Nadu, the caste system, became less rigid after the tsunami (in some areas). But in some areas caste system still presents a problem as people of one caste may not like to be housed in the same community as the others.

1993 earthquake in India, people became homeless. So the recovery process started with grants being given for the construction of new houses. But it appeared that men used up the money for gambling instead. The local government changed the policy for house entitlement by involving the women/ women groups and that helped set right the problem.

This also helped changed the traditional equation between the men and the women, with the women playing a more active and central role in decision making

Earlier experiences in house construction/ reconstruction was that the new house was in the name of the man, this too has now changed and the reconstructed homes are now jointly in the names of the woman and the man.

It helps disaster survivors to cope with trauma and depression

by keeping them active, busy, working together and making them the prime movers in the process of managing, planning and carrying out their own relief and rehabilitation. When you work as a group your individual problem does not seem so big.

It builds people's collective "community power" in many different ways.

It promotes a sense of belonging to the group, solidarity, security.

By involving them in all aspects of the relief and rebuilding process, it strengthens people's confidence in their capacity to manage their own longer-term development. It helps people to become more articulate, more aware, more savvy about negotiating for what they need. It empowers them.

It strengthens communities' collective management skills because the community is the key management mechanism in the relief process – so all the rehabilitation direction and work comes from people and reflects their real problems and needs.

It strengthens women's involvement and status as full, needed, active leaders in the recovery process, even in cases where their roles were more marginal or cloistered before the disaster hit. In India, for example, women's involvement was mostly confined to the house and were not involved in village decision making, but after the tsunami and earthquakes, were more involved, their opinions were sought. In Thailand, women are equal partners to men, helping after landslides, floods and tsunami to help in doing damage survey, cleaning up, cooking food.

It strengthens social relations and collective action. Disasters can be a chance to rebuild society and restructure inequitable social relations within communities, and within larger constituencies.

It increases people's economic strength by making room for them to identify their economic needs and develop livelihood options to getting their lost jobs and businesses back to start earning and being self reliant again..

It preserves affected communities' customs, culture and ways of life:

Poor communities have a culture of living, and people have "knowledge capital" in how to survive, they have common beliefs, history and unity. Without these things, they could not have survived! Post-disaster development activities should not be used as a means of transforming communities into a new way of life. People can maintain the spirit, local wisdom and culture of their affected communities throughout the rehabilitation process in ways outsiders can't.

It opens up deep, structural problems of poverty which have been simmering under the surface and have haunted and exploited poor communities for years and years, but which have not been addressed

– problems like unclear land tenure. These are problems which the government has not been able to solve through its conventional, slow bureaucratic systems, but which the disaster makes urgent and open.

Because geography demands it.

The impacts of disasters are widespread and so it is critical that the all those affected be involved from the very beginning (the Philippines, for example, is a country of 7,000 islands and experiences an average of 19 typhoons per year. Dealing with so many natural disasters requires local people's involvement - governments alone cannot handle them.

Question 2.

What are the tools, mechanisms and processes which enable affected people and their communities to drive their own recovery process?

1. GET BUSY right away and start lots and lots of activities which address immediate and long-term needs, but which also bring people together.

Start with something small, this will help to create positive energy in the community. A small success like cleaning the canal can help to create confidence and encourage and helps to create a

result. This result can then be shared with others and from this small activity we are able to bring more people together. Start with what you CAN do. Lots of things are impossible to do at first, and so many needs are not being met, so much chaos, etc. But the important thing is do those things which can begin to build some hope that change is possible, and to build the collective spirit and collective confidence that something is possible, bit by bit.

The rebuilding work should be done by local communities themselves, as much as possible. Keep contractors out, let communities take responsibility for their own housing, often this also lead to improved social relations within the members of the community.

Open opportunities for everyone in the community to participate and be in the process.

Organise lots and lots of local exchange visits and forums : Every week! To see what others are doing, to show what you are doing. Local visits between affected communities don't cost anything but can be great solidarity-boosters and idea-spread-arounders, and network-builders. Out of city or out of country exchanges are also great and helpful, but since they are more expensive, they can't be very often.

Have lots and lots of big events : To gather people, to generate excitement, to make small bits of progress into big public milestones, to invite officials and partners onto your turf, to bring your negotiations into the public realm, to make a noise that is proactive instead of only protesting. Organise such big events around any and all milestones (first house completed, presentation of community's plan, ground breaking for first house, visit of some official or some other group, Queen's birthday, etc.). Invite everyone and this is the chance to bring all those reluctant officials on board.

Try to develop revival activities of all sorts, covering all aspects of the community – both physical, economic, cultural and social – so the rehabilitation after a disaster is holistic and sustainable, on all fronts.

Providing relevant skill training like masonry enables women to be more active in reconstruction, or education or engineering so that people can get employment within their community.

Promote local knowledge and practices in recovery process like using traditional house building, traditional medicine, story-telling, etc. Try to use the problem solving process as a way to boost local wisdom, so people can learn from this disaster and the next generation can inherit this wisdom. Like in northern Thailand, the people used available materials or what are left after the disaster for house building.

Set up different groups in the communities like youth groups, women's groups, elderly groups, boat-building groups, environment groups, temporary housing groups, relief donation management groups, cooking groups, etc. so that there is room for everyone in the community to help, to get involved and to bring their skills and ideas into the process.

Creating community centre or information centre as a "bridge" to link different stakeholders, and as a place to facilitate dialogues.

Setting up community savings groups is a simple way of getting people organized and getting people to work together –

Culture : Use the social and cultural capital that exists in communities as a way to bring people together and build up their communal strength.

2. Build networks and linkages within and between affected communities and existing community organizations in disaster areas

Scattered individual community organisations all need to link together in some way, through networks or federations.

Start small with those who understand and expand later to include larger area and more groups. No need to get everyone on board at the start! This is a way to build community strength.

Link communities to increase their collective bargaining power - communities have no strength in isolation. When communities link together around common problems and common struggles, they can negotiate and bargain and fight collectively, for the things they all need. Networking communities together increases community power, brings the power of numbers and the clout of large scale into the formula.

Working together is a means of sharing the burdens, sharing the breakthroughs and rewards. Linking together into networks is a way to give moral support to each other.

Keep the diversity among groups and respect differences in people's situations and priorities across a disaster situation - don't try to control everybody too much or get them all to do the same way.

Try to find common issues, common problems and common interest. Try to build common criteria and agreement for all the different groups to do something together. Make a clear target and common direction.

Sharing experiences, lessons learnt and best practices between affected communities also provides opportunities for a people lead recovery process. It helps other communities that are not exposed to people driven process to rethink their approach and problems.

3. Focus on common problems and common directions, not on differences.

Try to respect differences and diversity among people within communities and among groups within networks, and try to minimize conflicts. Plan and collaborate where it is possible, and let it go (but keep linking and sharing and talking!) where it is not possible.

Try to set common agreement and a common direction on the basis of belief and common community culture as well as religion and other things which bring people together.

It is not necessary to focus only on problems – issues that are common, like culture, can also be very effective bringers-together of people and collectivity-builders after a disaster

4. Know your communities! Information :

Must get and maintain detailed information about your community. Important at the very outset of a disaster that you quickly gather community profile. This information will help to facilitate many discussions, planning processes and help to determine the needs of the community. Community-conducted surveys should start right away and continue throughout the rehabilitation process.

Observe the situation and gather needs of different communities as the basis of real community information.

Know your own communities : affected people need to have basic information about their own communities and need to really understand the strengths and potentials of these communities. This information is then the basis for your reconstruction and community revival planning

This information also becomes a tool in your negotiations with the state and with various involved agencies and actors. Why? Because it's very likely that the information you have is FAR better and more accurate than anything they have.

Social assessment : It is also important to study and understand people's real needs and priorities after the disaster in a survey. Instead of just physical needs after a disaster, have to understand people's serious social needs also.

Information must be easily available and accessible. Ensure that all communities can access the information, so we must look into issues of language and the medium in which it is communicated. Not everybody has a TV or cell phone so one needs to ensure that there is also a system in the community to exchange and share information quickly especially if it is an early warning to a disaster.

5. Get aid budgets directly to affected communities :

Most donor money intended for disaster victims does not reach those who most need it – it gets spent along the way in management and overheads, gets diverted, gets delayed and gets lost in corruption. Most disaster aid passes through governments (itself a disaster!) and then governments use their conventional systems to deliver that aid – systems which are slow, rigid, narrow, bureaucratic and almost never work in a major disaster crisis. So it is important that aid should go directly to affected communities . Or if it does go through governments, then governments need to find ways to bypass these conventional bureaucratic systems and deliver the aid quickly and directly to affected communities.

Grants should pass directly to communities to manage. If aid funds can be passed directly to communities, then the people can design, plan and build themselves.

NGOs have a very important facilitating role to play in disaster situations – they should not become channels for aid budgets for affected communities, or act as brokers or middle-men for aid flows or pretend they are governments in a crisis!

NGOs should push people's real needs up to the funders, not push the funder's agendas and targets down on top of grassroots people's heads. NGOs can help link donors directly to communities and community networks, which identify their own needs.

People should be should be strong enough to be able to say no to donors which will not adjust themselves to people's own plans and answer the needs which they themselves set.

Community organisations and not individuals should make proposals for what they need and deal with outside aid groups collectively. By the other token, donors should not try to go straight to individual people and break up communities.

Channeling grant money and donations into a revolving loan fund can be a means of pulling people together (instead of dividing them, as individual donations often do) and getting them to

work together and make decisions about how to use this common resource together. Plus, the funds revolve, so scarce resources becomes re-usable and sustainable.

Community managed welfare funds can also bring communities together and give them a chance to make decisions together about helping their own most vulnerable community members.

6. Communities have to make their own plans :

Affected communities have to develop their own plans for redeveloping their damaged lives and communities – plans which include all aspects of their lives – including finance, livelihood, health, welfare, land, housing, etc.. Once people know what they want to, this plan becomes a tool for negotiating with others for resources and assistance. Outside help has its own agenda, a community plan and strategy can help change this agenda and make it more appropriate to what people really need, not development fashions.

Communities also have to develop plans for redeveloping their settlements, housing and infrastructure damaged by the disaster. They to have ready very clear plans, which architects can assist in drafting, in which houses, settlement layout and infrastructure are detailed. These plans have to reflect people's way of living, not someone else's idea of what they need.

7. Affected communities can play a big role in coordinating aid efforts in a disaster situation :

Need for a sustained, open local dialogue in disaster situations : To bring together all the different groups to discuss issues, meet frequently. This is a way to put everyone's work, their plans and problems, and the policies and budgets all on the table for everyone to see and know about. This is a way to bring groups together to share and learn, even if they don't opt to work together. It's hard to coordinate aid organisations, but communities can do this because they are "at the end of the pipe."

8 Negotiate with government and other actors in the rehabilitation game

Building allies : Try to link with many different actors and keep opening space for existing local and national actors to be involved – local government officials, mayors, district and state and national officials and key government bureaucrats, NGOs, academics, architects, etc.. You can do this by just inviting them for ceremonies and ribbon-cuttings and events, or involving them more significantly in your reconstruction process. This is a way to build bridges with potential sources of support.

Not all government people are bad guys: We should not negate the government totally. Certainly there are some individuals that we could link up and work with.

Get on the offensive with your own proposals : Go into negotiations with government and agencies with your own nicely-worked-out and beautifully presented plans and information of your own! Don't wait for the government to come to you with their awful plans which have nothing to do with what you need, in which you then become the nay-sayer! When people make the first move,

and come with all their homework done and their proposals all ready to go, it is a way of pushing the government to play the game according to your rules.

Keep persisting: A lot of these problems that communities face after disasters cannot be solved over night – problems like land tenure security, livelihood revival, etc. Communities need to develop the strength, the confidence, the persistence and the longer-term vision to keep working on it, to not give up!

Policies that come from the bottom-up rather than the top-down: The community's strength should make the development process move from the grassroots right up to the policy level (“bottom – up”)

Question 3.

How can we build linkages, networks and communication channels between affected communities?

1. Exposure and exchange is a tool to help people believe change is possible :

Need to organise lots and lots of exchanges between disaster affected communities in the same city, sub-district, district, province, country, region, etc. People need to see with their own eyes that change is possible, need to see concrete activities which others are doing which show that change is possible, that people can transform their lives and settlements in concrete ways. Exposure and exchange visits can be powerful attitude-changers and can be potent sources of inspiration.

2. People need to have some resources of their own,

which they manage themselves and control themselves. Usually money is always in the hands of others: government agencies, aid agencies, NGOs, etc. But if communities have some finance under their own control and in their own hands, they can plan things and implement what they need, and need not wait for others to grant permission!

3. Use common problems to build relationships and linkages between people and between affected communities.

Try to include people with the same problems to make proposals together and mobilize people around common issues and common struggles. Disasters can be powerful forces for bringing scattered people into new kind of unity when they suddenly find themselves facing the same huge problems which they can't solve alone.

4. Try to develop core leadership and bring up new leaders

by starting so many different kinds of activities, which make room for new leaders to emerge and create new pools of enthusiasm and new opportunities for involvement.

5. It is important to produce some real, concrete achievement as soon as possible, don't just talk and talk and talk!

You have to do or make or improve something that you can see and touch, something like houses. This first achievement – even if it is very small – can be a powerful way of showing that people can deliver development. Has to be something real, something show-able. To inspire the next step, to create confidence and speed things up. In order to build a network or organisation in your own community start with a small activity. Use the small activity to organise people.

6. You don't always have to develop new committees or organisations, often you can use existing ones and build on them.

Use natural groups that already exist in the community such as housewife group, parent teacher groups etc

7. Start with people who have the same problem,

and someone who has strong and genuine intention to solve the problem. Use this as a mechanism to bring people together. Thereafter share your experience with other community or village.

Recovery is the hardest phase as this is when most communities are left to fend for themselves so need to map out a strategy, identify risk or problem areas. See how these problem areas can be linked to existing networks, networks who are also struggling with the same issues. This helps to make the issue more urgent or helps to give it recognition.

8. Examples from SETU (formed in Kutch after Gujarat Earthquake)

Building network at different levels, local, national, regional, international, etc. and linking different levels together. Having an information centre or community resource centre will enable the people to identify, link up, and make use of community “experts”. Disseminating of local information and knowledge is also very important.

Using IT as communication channels (e.g. to link with high up government official) like video conference, etc.

This is a summary of discussions with disaster survivors from floods and storms in Asia.

Who attended the meeting?

There were about 200 people in this large gathering, most of whom were community members from areas that had experienced serious disasters in the past few years, including tsunamis, floods, earthquakes, storms, land-slides and droughts.

42 disaster community survivors and their NGO supporters from 8 Asian countries (including Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Maldives, India, Philippines, Japan, Nepal and Vietnam)

10 community leaders from Hurricane Katrina-hit New Orleans and the Gulf Coast of USA

38 community leaders from 8 flood and landslide-affected provinces in Northern Thailand

60 community leaders from 10 tsunami and flood-affected provinces in Southern Thailand

15 Thai government officials, from national, provincial, district and local administration levels.

14 representatives from UNDP and UN-Habitat and other UN-affiliated organisations

19 representatives from Thai NGOs, foundations, academic institutions and donors

The seminar was organised and co-sponsored by

CODI

Chumchon Thai Foundation

ACHR

UN-Habitat and UNDP