

Recovery with Dignity: A workshop for reimagining post-disaster long-term recovery

07-09 July 2021

Concept Note

What shapes disaster recovery? Who decides what interventions to implement and whose voice is heard in these recovery processes? And how do different people from disaster-affected communities to governments and the media define recovery? In a 3-year project, Recovery with Dignity, we tried to answer these questions drawing on insights from Odisha, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala. In this 3-day workshop we are inviting you to build on this conversation on inclusive disaster recovery.

While the media, government, civil society organisations, and humanitarian actors have their own understanding of disasters, those affected may have a different perspective that is often not as well understood or represented, especially in a context of urgency and lack of effective participatory processes. However, it is these ideas that various actors have that inform their recovery actions, and thereby affect the outcomes for those affected.

Disaster impacts come in all forms, from damaged housing and livelihoods, to mental trauma and eroded community assets including places of worship and mangroves which hold meaning for daily life and value for communal practices. Moreover, these impacts take a long-time to recover. However, traditional recovery actions tend to choose repairing physical infrastructure over social needs or restoring livelihoods over environmental losses, and in the process leave people to deal with the remaining losses on their own. In this, disasters also affect different people and places differently, varying along the multiple lines of identity based on where they are, who they are, and what they have. Often, while the most marginalised are also the most affected, they have the least power and ability to direct their recovery trajectories. Thereby, despite various actions taken and resources invested, affected people do not entirely recover, or are left worse-off in the long-term. Effectively, disasters are anything but 'great levellers'.

Unfortunately, these realities have become more widespread, vivid, and personal after the COVID-19 pandemic. But these are not new phenomena by any measure, and there are several parallels to be drawn with past experiences of disasters closer to home in India, as well as from other contexts where marginalisation and inequalities define the development processes.

India has a long history of such disasters, disaster recovery, and development processes, and in this workshop, we reflect on current disaster recovery practices to understand what guides recovery priorities, how they affect long-term recovery outcomes, and what can we learn from these experiences to course-correct such that recovery is both sustainable and inclusive of the real and long-term needs of disaster-affected people (DAPs) and places.

People's lives are complex. They are connected to their socio-economic and environmental systems in intricate ways and the values and meanings these hold vary across different individuals and

communities. In this, people carefully balance the resources they have access to, to maximize their capabilities and reduce their vulnerabilities for a variety of risks. In this, the resource distribution is unequal, and so is their risk exposure. In such a context when a hazard befalls, its impacts take many forms. It unsettles people's lives and future aspirations, disrupts their livelihoods, and changes their environments in significant and often irreversible¹ ways. Its impacts may not always be visible, immediate, linear or direct². This renders recovering after a disaster to be an involved process.

Yet, disaster management practices and policies in countries like India, which have made significant advances in the last two decades from being primarily reactive to including preparedness approaches, remain largely silent on holistic long-term recovery. For multiple state and non-state actors associated with recovery processes, the focus is on 'recovering *after* the disaster' and is often seen as an opportunity to "build" back better. This focus on rebuilding tends to ignore people's lives *before* a disaster - not only the underlying vulnerabilities that cause differential disaster impacts but also peoples' aspirations and capabilities.

Due to the 'urgency' imposed by disaster events, participatory processes are often curtailed and DAP's self-determined recovery priorities are not understood, prioritized, or included. Effectively, despite large investments made in reconstruction and rehabilitation programmes post-disasters, many systemic issues and underlying drivers of vulnerabilities remain unaddressed. Even once such programmes are complete, there are rarely any long-term monitoring and evaluation processes undertaken to ensure that the recovery objectives are met and no new risks are created in the process for the people and their socio-ecological systems.

Disaster events, affected communities, and their needs are represented in policies and other popular narratives in ways that deeply affect the recovery processes and their outcomes³. Legal avenues are limited by the framing and provisions entailed in the laws that govern disaster management and general lack of access to legal resources⁴. In addition, there are limited forums where the disaster-affected people are able to voice their recovery needs. The experiences of women, people of caste or other racial and ethnic minorities in claiming their rights are far worse. The media, operating on short news cycles and shorter attention spans, tends to focus on relief, and less on recovery, and even in that it limits the role of survivors to providing emotional sound bites or visuals, and reserves the discussions to "experts". While DAP's experiences are regularly reported, they are largely devoid of any analysis on underlying causes and conditions that lead to the disaster, while "normalizing" the survivor's trauma for their audiences over time⁵. Survivors are rarely seen as agents, and victimhood ("suffering") is the focus. This affects the dignity of the people in significant ways for a long time.

Meanwhile, communities and individuals have used trust, social networks⁶, and different forms of expressions of art³ as effective currency to deal with their situations. Communities have used ⁷ non-traditional forms of participation and indirect means of representation, to challenge entrenched roles and power structures and garner support for long-term needs. Such moments also bring attention to the developmental needs and often transpire the conditions of "building back better"⁸.

There is a need to reflect on the forms, modes, and reasons of meanings made of disasters, recovery actions, communities, and actors, and their implications thereby on the long-term development outcomes for people and places. More critically, there is a need to build platforms and processes that enable DAPs to voice their recovery priorities, self-direct their life trajectories, and, with that, recover with dignity.

What this workshop seeks to do:

1. Experiment to draw from a variety of cases and different knowledge systems that suggest alternate pathways to reimagine recovery such that the focus shifts from a limited view of 'post-disaster' to a more fulfilling and sustainable life for the people. The workshop intends to present recovery as a long-term process where disaster(s) are one in a series of events that shape vulnerability, and the need for recovery actions to look beyond infrastructure and be more inclusive. In particular, it aims to draw lessons from past disasters about recovery narratives, responses, and outcomes to understand the way forward for the post-COVID-19 recovery.
2. Offer a platform to critically reflect on the implications of current post-disaster recovery practices, processes and measures on understanding the long-term recovery needs of and outcomes for people, communities, and at-risk places.
3. Serve as a forum to convey the perspectives of DAPs to the various actors involved in recovery work. (Originally, it was planned to bring the disaster affected community members directly to the workshop to speak for themselves, however, in current circumstances this has been limited to a large extent).
4. Build upon the existing, diverse community of recovery actors and researchers in India and beyond to share knowledge and experiences and draw from each other in their future work.
5. Contributes to wider discussions on bringing together the interdisciplinary fields of disaster management and development studies, which otherwise barely intersect institutionally. Academically, it will highlight the importance of 'social science, humanities & arts for people & the economy' (SHAPE) to better understand and thereby respond to these complex situations.

Audience

The workshop will bring together policy-makers, practitioners, researchers, students, civil society, and humanitarian actors working on disaster management in different ways. The sessions will also be useful for media professionals and journalists covering post-disaster issues to reflect on and reimagine their current practices. Although the workshop's subject is specific, it touches on areas that are of interest to a growing number of people who work on disasters, climate change, urbanization, sustainable development, and the environment, apart from all those who are directly affected by extreme events. This subject has international appeal as it relates to a phenomenon that is occurring more and more frequently across the world.

Workshop dates, form, and agenda

The workshop will take place online over three days – 7th to 9th July 2021 - in the form of discussions, alongside an online exhibition, screenings of films and theatre, and a book launch. It will be primarily in English with some sessions translated to and from Odia and Tamil. Following is the draft agenda for the days:

Day 1: Recovery needs and current approaches - The discussions will position disasters in the context of development, and will analyse the current policies and practices of post-disaster interventions made by a variety of actors -- the State, humanitarian aid agencies, and civil society -- from the perspective of long-term recovery and growth. Each session will reflect on how these actors perceive and portray disaster-affected people and the implications that it has on their long-term recovery outcomes.

- Session 1 (1pm-2:30pm IST) – **Experiences of disasters and recovery:** People from communities, governments, civil society, research teams, etc. share their personal experiences of ways of recovering to deal with the invisible and non-visible losses [Moderators: Plenary – Subasri Krishnan; Breakout Groups: Odia – Vasudha Chhotray, Tamil – Rekha Raghunathan]
- Session 2 (3pm-4:00pm IST) – **“Recovery with Dignity” findings and workshop roadmap** [Presenter: Roger Few, Garima Jain and Chandni Singh]
- Session 3 (4:30pm-6pm IST) – **Disaster Recovery Actions and Policy Priorities in India:** Recovery practitioners discuss the current policies and avenues for reimagining recovery [Speakers: Kamal Kishore (NDMA), Sekhar Kuriakose (KSDMA), Aurobindo Behera (Ex-OSDMA), Rita Missal (UNDP), Annie George (BEDROC), Jyotiraj Patra (OXFAM); Moderator: Garima Jain]

Day 2: Issues in focus - The day will focus on identifying gaps in current practices of recovery, reflecting on processes of priority identifications by various actors, narrative building and its implications, and long-term disproportionate outcomes on people and places

- Session 4 (1pm-2:30pm IST) - **Missing links in long-term outcomes of recovery actions-** Reflecting on dominant recovery practices such as resettlement, in the context of other damages not addressed such as environmental losses, psychosocial issues, and special needs of people. [Rohit Jigyasu (ICCROM), Sneha Krishnan (OP Jindal University), Rachna Dhingra (Sambhavana), Mahima Jain (Earth Journalism Network); Moderator: Vasudha Chhotray]
- Session 5 (3pm-4:30pm IST) - **“Rethinking Urban Risk and Resettlement in the Global South”:** A Book launch [Allan Lavell, Cassidy Johnson and Garima Jain in conversation with Emily Wilkinson and Amir Bazaz]
- Session 6 (5pm-6:30pm IST) – **Speaking Truth to Power:** Reflecting on narrative building efforts by those in power, to supplant facts and experiences. Disaster-affected community members reflect on past reconstruction projects and media coverage and communication, and how “normalization” sets in [Malini Bhattacharjee (Azim Premji University), Lisa Bornstein (McGill University), Sibi Arasu (Journalist); Moderator: Mark Tebboth]

Day 3: Shaping Recovery as Alternate Pathways - The discussions will draw from case studies from India and the global South where recovery interventions have gone beyond the immediate needs after a disaster to effectively support the disaster affected communities in self-driving recovery to affect their overall development trajectories. The day will assimilate the concluding thoughts on future directions for practice and research.

- Session 7 (1pm-2pm IST) – **The life before and after:** The session will attempt to re-pivot the dominant recovery view from “post” disaster to understanding the importance of pre-existing lives and aspirations of the people. To do so, the session will draw on the play “Geeta” by Natya Chetana from Odisha, a documentary film “My camera and the Tsunami” by RV Ramani from Tamil Nadu, and the inspiring story of Chekutty Dolls in Kerala. [*Subodh Pattnaik (Natya Chetana), RV Ramani (Independent Documentary film maker), Lakshmi Menon (Chekutty Dolls), Teresa Armijos Burneo (UEA); Moderator: Garima Jain*]
- Session 8 (3pm-4pm IST) - **SHAPE & STEM:** Discussion on alternate ways to understand recovery needs and priorities and the need to borrow from social science, humanities & arts for people & the economy [*Hetan Shah (British Academy) in discussion with Aromar Revi (IIHS); Moderated by Garima Jain*]
- Session 9 (4pm-5pm IST) - **Alternate platforms of recovery and self-representation:** [*Speakers: Shalini Sharma (Remember Bhopal Museum), Mary Vattanam (Timbaktu Collective), Divya Chandrasekhar (University of Utah), Fr. Bijoya Thomas Karukappally (Radio Maattoli), Maxmillan Martin (University of Sussex), Alexandra Woodall (UEA); Moderator: Hazel Marsh*]
- Session 10 (5pm-6pm IST) - **Reimagining recovery practices:** Project Team and Advisors share the final reflections and ways forward for research and practice [*Moderator: Roger Few*]

Associated Briefs

- Few, Roger, Garima Jain, Chandni Singh, Mark Tebboth, Vasudha Chhotray, Hazel Marsh, Nihal Ranjit, and Mythili Madhavan. 2021. “Why Representation Matters in Disaster Recovery.” *The British Academy*. London, UK. <https://doi.org/doi.org/10.5871/gcrf/9780856726569.001>.
- Few, Roger, Vasudha Chhotray, Mark Tebboth, Johanna Forster, Carole White, Teresa Armijos, and Clare Shelton. 2020. “COVID-19 Crisis: Lessons for Recovery_ What Can We Learn from Existing Research on the Long-Term Aspects of Disaster Risk and Recovery?” *The British Academy*. London, UK.
<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/2604/COVID-19-Crisis-Lessons-for-Recovery-Shape-the-Future.pdf>.

About the project and funding

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References

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