

HPG Working Paper

# Disaster as opportunity?

Building back better in Aceh,  
Myanmar and Haiti

Lilianne Fan

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## About the author

Lilianne Fan is a Research Fellow with the Humanitarian Policy Group at ODI.

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Humanitarian Policy Group  
Overseas Development Institute  
203 Blackfriars Road  
London SE1 8NJ  
United Kingdom

Tel. +44 (0) 20 7922 0300  
Fax. +44 (0) 20 7922 0399  
E-mail: [hpgadmin@odi.org](mailto:hpgadmin@odi.org)  
Website: <http://www.odi.org/hpg>

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# 1 Introduction

The Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 was a disaster of unparalleled proportions, devastating the lives and livelihoods of millions of people across 14 countries. It also prompted an international response that was unprecedented in its scale. Billions of dollars were raised for relief and reconstruction, and thousands of people and hundreds of aid agencies from around the world were directly involved in recovery efforts. The response sought not just to reinstate what the tsunami had destroyed, but to leave the communities it had affected better, fairer, stronger and more peaceful than they had been before the disaster struck. As former US President Bill Clinton put it in his capacity as UN Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery: ‘We need to make sure that this recovery process accomplishes more than just restoring what was there before’. This aspiration – encapsulated in the phrase ‘build back better’ – quickly became the recovery effort’s mantra, guiding principle and enduring promise. Within months, the recovery came to be regarded as a means not only to rebuild assets and capacities directly affected by the disaster, but also to bring to an end long-running civil conflicts in Aceh and Sri Lanka; build the capacity of institutions; expand access to services such as health and education; reduce poverty and strengthen livelihood security; advance gender equality; and empower and open up spaces for civil society.

Since the tsunami, build back better has been advocated in many other disasters, including the Kashmir earthquake in Pakistan and Hurricane Katrina in the United States in 2005, Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar in 2008 and the Haiti earthquake of 2010. Following the Kashmir earthquake, there were hopes that Pakistan and India would use the disaster as an opportunity to bring their long-running conflict in the disputed region of Kashmir to an end. While these hopes were ultimately unfulfilled, the Pakistan government’s Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority (ERRA) continued to pursue an explicit ‘build back better’ agenda.<sup>1</sup> Following Cyclone Nargis in May 2008, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

defined the humanitarian mission in Myanmar as a double challenge ‘to build back better for both of us, for Myanmar and for ASEAN’, to restore the country to ‘its traditional role as the rice bowl not only of Myanmar but of Southeast Asia’ and at the same time ‘show that ASEAN is relevant’ and that cooperation between ASEAN and the United Nations during the Nargis recovery effort would help forge ‘a new model of humanitarian partnership’ for Southeast Asia.<sup>2</sup>

By insisting that humanitarian assistance in response to crisis should somehow do more than ‘simply’ saving lives and alleviating suffering in advance of the next terrible event, over and over again, build back better is the latest iteration of a longstanding concern to link immediate relief with longer-term processes of recovery and development. Humanitarian actors and their donors have developed a whole host of concepts, theories and approaches to express this ambition, from Linking Relief, Rehabilitation and Development (LRRD) to early recovery, capacity-building, disaster risk reduction, sustainable development and, most recently, resilience. That the aid sector has felt the need to think up so many related concepts is testament to the stubborn persistence of the problems that these ideas and approaches were meant to address.

The concept of linking relief and development came to prominence in the 1980s, reflecting a realisation that the ‘grey zone’ between these ‘phases’ of assistance was consistently under-funded (Ramet, 2012), and that more systematic attempts to link them were needed. Development, it was argued, could reduce the need for emergency relief; more effective relief could support longer-term development; and better rehabilitation could ease the transition between the two (EC, 1996). The early concept of a linear ‘continuum’ from relief to development evolved into a ‘contiguum’, to reflect the fact that different needs may exist at the same time, and that rehabilitation and development may at times need to be conducted alongside relief activities. LRRD distinguished between different categories of

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1 See Pakistan Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority, <http://www.erra.pk>.

2 Speech by ASEAN Secretary-General H. E. Dr. Surin Pitsuwan at the Roundtable on the Post-Nargis Joint Assessment, Yangon, Myanmar, 28 June 2008.

crisis (natural disasters, armed conflict and structural crisis) and a range of modalities, instruments and approaches for working in each. It also called for stronger coordination and coherence between humanitarian and development actors from the earliest stages of a response (Action Aid Alliance, 2003).

The quest for greater coherence, effectiveness and accountability in humanitarian and development aid circles contributed to the creation of the Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) initiative of 2003. GHD called for humanitarian assistance to be provided in such a way that it could support recovery and long-term development, help to maintain and restore sustainable livelihoods and support the transition from humanitarian relief to recovery and development. GHD's emphasis on coherence was further elaborated in the Paris Declaration two years later, which outlined five principles of aid effectiveness (ownership, alignment, harmonisation, results and mutual accountability), and the Accra Agenda for Action, which sought to accelerate the Paris Declaration commitments and underline the importance of national leadership of aid coordination.

This concern for the role of national organisations in relief responses and the strengthening of national and local capacities to respond is also at the centre of the concept of early recovery. Defined as a multi-dimensional approach to recovery, guided by development principles but beginning in a humanitarian setting, the aim of early recovery is to 'restore the capacity of national institutions and communities to recover from conflict or a natural disaster, enter transition or "build back better", and avoid relapses' (UNDP, 2008). Conceptually, early recovery explicitly links the restoration and strengthening of state capacity to sustainable post-crisis recovery. National capacity is also emphasised in the concept of resilience, which came to prominence in humanitarian circles with its inclusion in the UK government's Humanitarian Emergency Response Review (HERR) of 2011, though the focus here is less on the state and more on the resilience of local communities and their capacity to cope with crisis.

On the face of it the aspiration to build back better – to use the opportunity of a disaster response to leave societies improved, not just restored – is self-evidently common sense; after all, who would want to build back *worse*, or simply reinstate conditions of inequality, poverty and vulnerability if the chance

for something better was at hand? Plainly, if some countries (Japan, say) survive earthquakes much better than others exposed to similar hazards (Haiti, say), then there must presumably be structural reasons why many more people die in some places than in others, and interventions blind to these structural problems will only end up perpetuating them. At the same time, however, build back better also raises a whole host of uncomfortable questions that the humanitarian community has yet to properly address. What exactly does 'better' look like? Better for whom, where, how? Who decides – agencies, donors, governments, affected communities – and how can these decisions be translated into meaningful programming? What are the implications of investing in build back better if it distracts attention and money away from the urgent and often overwhelming need to feed, treat and shelter people who have nothing but the clothes they stand up in, and for whom 'better' may well be a luxury for tomorrow, not today? Is it better to build one earthquake-proof home, when for the same money we could build ten, 12 or 20 that meet people's immediate need for a roof over their heads, but could be death-traps when the next earthquake strikes? Is it right for humanitarian agencies to think in these ambitious, transformative terms at all? Do they have the skills, knowledge, organisation and experience to engage in the long-haul complexity of social, political and economic change? Is it ethical in humanitarian terms to exploit people's vulnerability after a disaster to drive social change? And to what extent can questions of inequality be addressed by humanitarian aid at all?

The idea that disasters represent an opportunity for change and renewal is not new. The Great Kanto earthquake of 1923, for example, was seen at the time not just as an opportunity to reconstruct Tokyo as a new, modern city, but as the trigger for a wider process of social reform (Schencking, 2008). Whether humanitarian assistance has a role to play in this process of transformation is, however, another matter. Disasters can, perhaps, help raise attention to problems that need addressing, but does that necessarily mean that the post-disaster response itself is the right time to take action on these problems? Discussions of build back better have provided neither the tools to help address these critical questions, nor the criteria against which agencies can assess the pros and cons of adopting a build back better approach. This can be clearly seen in the most explicit attempt to articulate build back better, by Bill Clinton, then UN Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery (see Box 1).

## 2 Disaster as opportunity?



## Box 1: Key propositions for building back better

### Proposition 1

Governments, donors, and aid agencies must recognize that families and communities drive their own recovery.

### Proposition 2

Recovery must promote fairness and equity.

### Proposition 3

Governments must enhance preparedness for future disasters.

### Proposition 4

Local governments must be empowered to manage recovery efforts, and donors must devote greater resources to strengthening government recovery institutions, especially at the local level.

### Proposition 5

Good recovery planning and effective coordination depend on good information.

### Proposition 6

The UN, World Bank, and other multilateral agencies must clarify their roles and relationships, especially in addressing the early stage of a recovery process.

### Proposition 7

The expanding role of NGOs and the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement carries greater responsibilities for quality in recovery efforts.

### Proposition 8

From the start of recovery operations, governments and aid agencies must create the conditions for entrepreneurs to flourish.

### Proposition 9

Beneficiaries deserve the kind of agency partnerships that move beyond rivalry and unhealthy competition.

### Proposition 10

Good recovery must leave communities safer by reducing risks and building resilience.

*Source: Key Propositions for Building Back Better: A Report by the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery, William J. Clinton, United Nations, December 2006.*

While the Key Propositions present some valuable principles and approaches to guide good programming, they are not, with the exception of Proposition 10, specific to build back better. Nor do they provide a critical examination of the assumptions behind build back better, or any tools to consider the implications of adopting a build back better approach. In addition, very little analysis has been conducted to date on what various actors (including donors, international agencies, host governments and local civil society organisations) have actually done to translate the aspiration to build back better into humanitarian action in specific programming in post-crisis contexts. While some important work has been conducted within the shelter sector (see, for example, Kennedy et al., 2008) and in relation to peace-building (see, for example, Kingsbury 2007), the broader link between build back better, humanitarian concepts, humanitarian action and its impact needs to be better understood if humanitarian assistance is to make a meaningful

contribution to reducing people's vulnerability and increasing their resilience to future shocks.<sup>3</sup>

This HPG Working Paper seeks to contribute to the analytical base around build back better through an examination of its application in three disaster responses, the Indian Ocean tsunami in Aceh, Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar and the earthquake in Haiti. The three cases were selected because they all involved large-scale disasters, they all suffered from multiple problems prior to the disaster, including armed conflict, chronic poverty, weak public institutions and a lack of space for civil society, and they all offered a diverse range of institutional arrangements, levels of funding and actors involved in the response. Last but not least, the discourse of

<sup>3</sup> There is also a conspicuous lack of longitudinal studies of post-disaster recovery. Peter Winchester's *Power, Choice and Vulnerability* (1992) is an important exception.

build back better figured prominently in all three responses. The author worked in the recovery efforts in all three of the case studies between 2005 and 2011 and, as such, some of the analysis draws on the author's direct observations over this period.

A desk review was conducted, followed by more than 40 telephone and face-to-face interviews with government officials, aid agencies, donors and civil society and private sector actors involved in disaster recovery efforts in Aceh, Myanmar and Haiti.



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# 2 Post-tsunami Aceh: a chance for change

## 2.1 Context

*Peace for Aceh is the most powerful statement of 'building back better' we can make.*

Bill Clinton, UN Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery, 2006

On 26 December 2004, an earthquake measuring 9.1 on the Richter scale struck 240 kilometres off the coast of the Indonesian province of Aceh, on the northern tip of the island of Sumatra. The massive earthquake triggered a series of tsunamis that devastated not only a large part of Aceh, but also caused damage across the globe. Some 230,000 people from 14 countries lost their lives and millions were left homeless, making the tsunami one of the deadliest disasters in recorded history.

While the tsunami's destruction was felt around the world, the country most devastated by the disaster was Indonesia, which bore almost half of the total damage and losses worldwide. Almost all the tsunami damage in Indonesia occurred in Aceh. Out of a total population of four and a quarter million, over 120,000 lives were lost, and another 90,000 people were declared missing. Almost 500,000 survivors lost their homes, while as many as 750,000 people lost their livelihoods. Aceh's local authorities also suffered extensive losses. According to Indonesia's National Planning Agency, over 3,000 civil servants died and another 2,275 were reported missing, and 669 government buildings were destroyed (BAPPENAS, 2005).

Decades of conflict and inequitable patterns of economic development had made Aceh the fourth-poorest province in Indonesia. The 30-year conflict between separatist rebels and the central government had claimed between 15,000 and 25,000 lives, displaced over 400,000 people, destroyed the productive sector, hampered the delivery of basic services in many areas, weakened institutions, eroded the social fabric, traumatised a large portion of Acehnese society and created deep political fault-lines between Aceh and Jakarta (Government of Indonesia

et al., 2009). When the disaster struck, Aceh had been under 18 months of martial law and civil emergency following the collapse of peace negotiations between the central government and the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, or GAM). Aceh was effectively closed to most international aid agencies, with only the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and a small number of locally-staffed NGOs maintaining a presence on the ground (TEC, 2006). As one researcher observed, 'prior to the tsunami disaster the Aceh conflict had been a "silent war", isolated from the rest of the world because of the Indonesian government's unwillingness to internationalise the conflict, especially after East Timor's independence from Indonesia' (Senanayake, 2009).

On 28 December 2004, two days after the tsunami, President Susilo Bambang Yudhono requested international assistance and declared Aceh open to the international community to provide emergency relief. After the declaration, the number of international agencies in the province grew rapidly. The Tsunami Evaluation Coalition (TEC) reported that 'within a week of the tsunami more than 50 international organisations were on the ground; the figure rose to over 200 by mid-January' (TEC, 2006). The response to the disaster was unprecedented, both nationally and internationally. Local communities responded first, helping survivors in any way they could. A national response soon followed, with thousands of Indonesian citizens contributing emergency relief, including through the spontaneous mobilisation of volunteers. The international response was also unprecedented. By late January more than \$6 billion had been pledged for the overall tsunami response; by the end of the year that figure had risen to \$14bn. Of this, 34% was allocated to Indonesia (Flint and Goyder, 2006). National and international actors alike saw this unprecedented funding for the tsunami response as an enormous opportunity, not simply to replace destroyed housing and infrastructure, but to 'build back better'

(Renner and Chaffe, 2007; BRR, 2009a; Da Silva, 2010).

The tsunami offered Aceh another historic opportunity: the chance to bring the 30-year conflict to an end and begin the process of building peace. While an initiative to restart peace talks had begun a few days before the tsunami, it was the disaster that created, in the words of Yudhyono, ‘an overwhelming moral, political, economic, and social imperative to end the conflict’ (Government of Indonesia, 2006) and ensured that this time a peace agreement would be secured. On 15 August 2005, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Indonesian government and GAM leaders was signed, officially bringing the conflict to an end. The MoU explicitly recognised the link between the tsunami and peace, stating in the preamble that ‘The parties are deeply convinced that only the peaceful settlement of the conflict will enable the rebuilding of Aceh after the tsunami disaster on 26 December 2004 to progress and succeed’ (GoI and GAM, 2005).

## 2.2 The BRR: leading change in the face of the unknown

At the time of the tsunami, the National Coordinating Board for Disaster Management,<sup>4</sup> under the authority of the Vice-President, was the government agency responsible for coordinating national disaster relief. The Indonesian government also requested help from the United Nations to coordinate international assistance. This led to the establishment of a joint government–UN Disaster Management Centre within the Office of the Vice-President. Meanwhile, the Indonesian military (*Tentera Nasional Indonesia*, or TNI), which also suffered heavy loss of lives and installations as a result of the disaster, began organising search and rescue operations, as well as the burial of the dead in mass graves. The military effort too received international support, with some 4,500 troops from 16 countries eventually deployed to assist with relief operations, coordinated by the TNI (Wiharta et al., 2008).

It soon became clear to the government that the existing disaster relief mechanism was insufficient to coordinate an effective recovery effort. It was in this context that Yudhyono created a special agency in March 2005

to coordinate the tsunami reconstruction effort, the Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Agency (BRR) of Aceh-Nias, a ministerial-level agency under his direct authority.<sup>5</sup> Yudhyono deliberately selected an individual with a high reputation for accountability to lead it, appointing Kuntoro Mangkusubroto, a former minister of mines, as the BRR Executive Director. The agency’s four-year mandate was to design policies, strategies and action plans, and to lead and coordinate the combined domestic and international effort. The creation was supported by Indonesia’s international donors, who were committed not just to providing emergency relief to Aceh, but also to supporting Indonesia’s long-term political reform and development. At the time of the tsunami, Indonesia had a reputation as one of the most corrupt countries in the world. As donors recognised the importance of the relief effort being managed and coordinated through state institutions, it was also hoped that their financial and political support would help to advance accountability and the democratisation of these institutions.

Key to the BRR was Kuntoro’s leadership and personal vision. It took three months of negotiation between the President, who wanted things to be done ‘according to law’, and Kuntoro, who wanted a ‘blank cheque’ to shape the strategy and institution as he saw necessary, before agreement was reached on the level of authority and flexibility the BRR would be granted. Ultimate flexibility was important to Kuntoro because, as he explained in an interview with this author, ‘we had no conception of the problem we faced. The only thing I knew was that the problem was undefined. This is why I had only one request, and that was “flexibility”, almost total freedom. With 56 countries, 800 organisations, 8,000 foreigners, we had no model. We had no definition of the problem. What we needed was the freedom to innovate’. As such, the BRR did not follow a standard blueprint model. Instead, it was the outcome of a long negotiation between two political figures, and an adaptation to the reality and needs on the ground. While the BRR saw these processes as necessary for BBB, they could also be seen as standing in contradiction to the rules and requirements of ‘good donorship’, with its institutional checks and balances and emphasis on predictable systems, rather than on individuals with a high degree of executive authority and the freedom to work as they see fit.

4 Badan Koordinasi Nasional Penanggulangan Bencana dan Penanganan Pengungsi, or ‘BAKORNAS’.

5 On 28 March 2005, an earthquake measuring 8.9 on the Richter scale struck the island of Nias off the province of North Sumatra, killing more than 800 people, injuring over 6,000 and destroying public buildings and infrastructure. The government of Indonesia revised the Master Plan for Rehabilitation and Reconstruction to include Nias, and the BRR’s mandate was adjusted accordingly.

From the outset, the BRR explicitly used the language of build back better to describe its mission. This mission included rehabilitating infrastructure for economic development, such as airports and ports, engaging communities and local government, rebuilding local capacity and reinforcing social networks and initiatives to advance gender equality, including a joint land titling programme for resettled tsunami survivors. It also meant building trust with communities that had been previously marginalised. Local trust ‘was the necessary ingredient to engage beneficiaries to assist in rebuilding their communities for the common goal of a peaceful and prosperous future’ (Mangkusubroto et al., 2010). This was all part of the wider developmental goal to get Aceh onto a more equal footing with the rest of Indonesia. This commitment that ‘building back better’ meant using the recovery effort to change relations, addressing inequities and laying the ground for sustainable development, became joined to a wider national change in attitude to Aceh, with a new political commitment to bring Aceh (and Nias) into the national fold.

For the BRR, building back better also meant the reform of national governance systems through institutional innovation. The BRR spearheaded many innovations over the course of its four-year mandate, including the setting up of an autonomous anti-corruption unit (SAK), the first of its kind in any government agency, and the establishment of an Integrated Team to function as a one-stop-shop service to expedite the processing of the various documents required for the reconstruction operation. The BRR’s management model was also deliberately flexible to ensure speedy delivery and the ability to respond to a quickly changing environment. Many of these initiatives have since been replicated at national level for development purposes.

The BRR explicitly understood BBB as bringing Aceh out of poverty and isolation, including at the psychosocial and cultural level: ‘a historic task to rehabilitate and reconstruct both the physical infrastructure and the mental superstructure of Aceh and Nias so that the regions would become better than they had been before’ (BRR, 2009). The BRR also saw itself as playing an important role in peace-building. While the BRR’s mandate was limited to post-tsunami recovery, Kuntoro explicitly discussed the need to see reconstruction and reintegration as a ‘joint peace-building effort’ (Kuntoro and Sugiarto, 2007).

The government of Aceh did not use the language of build back better to frame recovery from the conflict

or the tsunami. For the Acehese government, as well as GAM, Acehese pro-democracy activists and intellectuals, the priority was an end to the conflict, peace, ‘self-government’ and the right to lead their own development. The Aceh government saw the Helsinki MoU, not the tsunami, as the path to restoring its sovereignty through a new governance arrangement that recognised Aceh’s right to ‘self-government’, even if not to independence. This was a historic development for Aceh, after decades of fighting against the central government, and many decades before that fighting against the Dutch occupation. Although some Acehese actors did see reconstruction as an opportunity to ‘restore’ the foundations of Acehese society that had been destroyed by the years of conflict, including relationships, trust and spaces for critique, this restoration was not discussed explicitly in terms of build back better, but rather as the opening to begin a long process of healing and rebuilding the fabric of Acehese society. Thus, while build back better was a popular buzz-word applied to a wide range of interventions in post-tsunami Aceh, it tended to be deployed primarily by non-Acehese actors and those involved specifically in tsunami recovery efforts. This raises the question of whether build back better is more useful for actors that are ordinarily positioned ‘outside’ the context in question, whose interventions are necessarily bound by short time-frames.

## **2.3 The cost of opportunity: resourcing build back better**

The BRR’s support for peace-building must be understood in the broader sense that the peace process itself was seen specifically as a key component of build back better by the Indonesian government. However, peace-building remained marginal to the international effort.

The reconstruction operation brought a dramatic increase in resources to Aceh and Nias, from both international and national funds. For many, the high level of funding in itself presented an unprecedented opportunity to build back better. Projections and valuations were conducted to estimate economic damage and losses, the cost of ‘building back’ to pre-tsunami conditions, the cost of ‘building back better’ and the impact of inflation. In its 2006 Aceh Expenditure Analysis, the World Bank reported that:

rehabilitation and reconstruction funds provide Aceh with the opportunity to rebuild a better province. By June 2006, US\$4.9 billion worth of projects and programs had been allocated to the reconstruction effort. An additional US\$3.1 billion have been pledged which will bring the total reconstruction program to US\$8 billion. With these additional funds, Aceh and Nias will have an opportunity to 'build back better' and invest in projects and programs that will have a long-lasting impact on their economies and social fabric (World Bank, 2006).

Figure 1 shows how the World Bank conceptualised build back better. It was separated, reified and costed as an addition to making good the 'damage and loss'. In this view, build back better was not a way of rebuilding in itself, but an optional extra set of activities that could be undertaken because there were more resources than were needed to simply rebuild. This view was not unique to the World Bank, but was shared by a number of international partners, including those involved in the Multi-Donor Fund for Aceh and Nias (Masrafah and McKeon, 2008; UNDP, 2010).

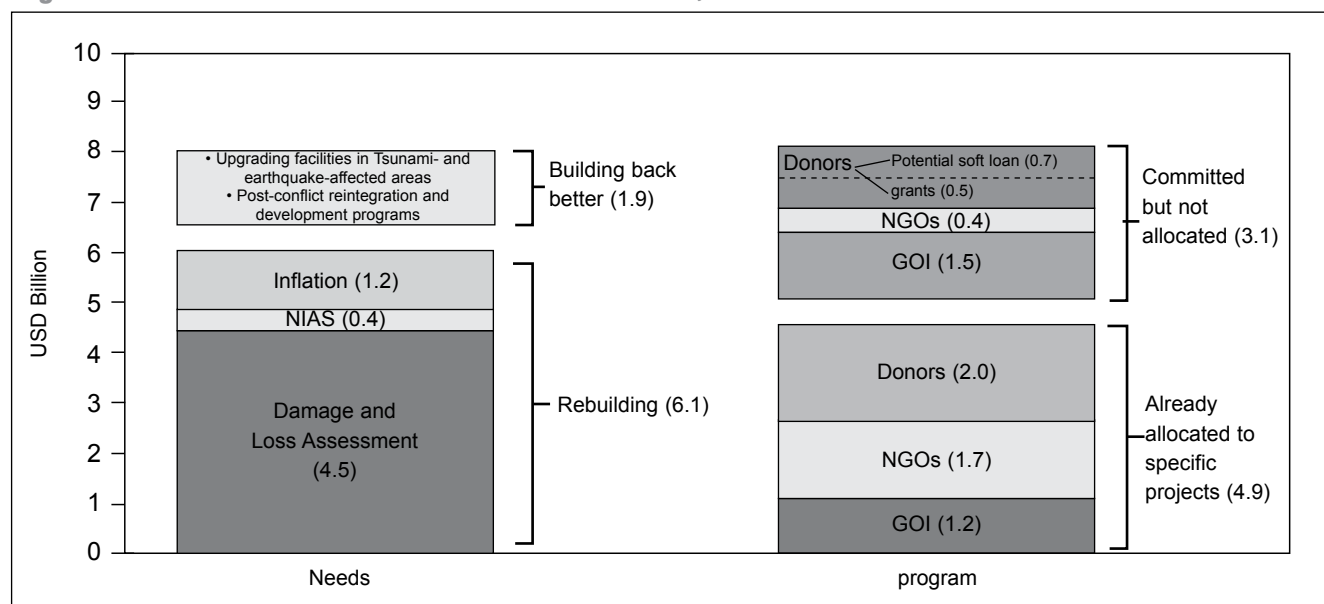
The majority of funds for rebuilding went to tsunami-affected areas, and attention to post-conflict recovery was relegated to a secondary priority. This was reinforced by bureaucratic structures and legal restrictions on shifting funding raised for the tsunami response to equally vulnerable conflict-affected communities. While economic losses as a result of the

conflict (\$10.7bn) were estimated to be almost twice the losses caused by the tsunami (GoI et al., 2009), total funds committed to reintegration and peace-building were estimated at \$895m, 'one-seventh the amount provided for the tsunami reconstruction effort' (GoI et al., 2009). This bifurcation of tsunami reconstruction and post-conflict recovery support had potentially important implications for build back better. If build back better is not just about physical infrastructure, but is also about transforming institutions and social and political relationships, as discussed above, then focusing funds on only one category of people ('the tsunami-affected'), and thereby creating issues of inequity, intrinsically undermined build back better, and diverted funds and attention away from the main issue that it needed to address in Aceh, namely rebuilding trust between the Acehnese and the central government. Although tsunami-affected people were also conflict-affected, it cannot be said that funds spent on addressing tsunami damage were in any way supporting recovery from conflict.

## 2.4 The practice of build back better

Humanitarian agencies saw opportunities even in the emergency response phase to 'build back better' through programmes that were intended to empower tsunami survivors in various ways. This ambition manifested itself in a variety of initiatives

Figure 1: Reconstruction needs and commitments, 2006



Source: World Bank, Aceh Expenditure Analysis 2006.

and approaches, including a large cash for work intervention, a campaign to provide information and shelter options to IDPs and disaster risk reduction. Again, the scale of the funding available for the emergency response was crucial: agencies had far more advisers on the ground than normal, which helped them to implement more innovative projects or to adopt previously identified best practice, and the label ‘BBB’ was used for these activities. However, the volume of resources came at a cost, as ‘agencies were under pressure to spend money quickly and meet donor deadlines, with no time to produce deeper analysis’ (TEC, 2006). Thus, the very conditions that made build back better possible also made its realisation difficult.

Cash transfers were at the time an innovative emergency response when done at scale. They were seen as a way of empowering survivors, not only through offering them urgent access to cash, but also by providing an opportunity for them to organise themselves, regain a sense of control over their lives and begin recovery. Cash programming at its peak reached nearly 18,000 participants, and disbursed over \$1m a month, a very significant amount in 2005 (Harvey, 2006). Agencies also worked on a public information campaign for IDPs on the range of shelter solutions available, and raised awareness among survivors about ways to reduce vulnerability to future disasters, organising early activities around ‘building back safer’, introducing communities to the importance of disaster risk reduction through community awareness, community-based planning and disaster-sensitive construction. One major international NGO, Mercy Malaysia, held a workshop entitled ‘Rebuilding a Safer Aceh’, bringing together faculty members from the main university in Aceh, local government, private construction workers and local community leaders from the affected population. Other initiatives included community-led and -implemented village infrastructure projects, for example the World Bank-funded Kecamatan Development Program, consensus-based village mapping processes and village budget planning and monitoring, such as AusAid’s LOGICA programme.

In the housing, land and property sector, the response was notable for the attention it paid to policy for renters, squatters, the landless and secondary rights holders, including widows and orphans. This went further than ensuring good practice in reconstruction, and in some cases became part of the effort to

transform social and political relationships. The BRR persuaded the central government to implement a land titling initiative for those being resettled that provided joint ownership between husband and wife, an initiative that became one of the BRR’s flagship examples of build back better. A coalition of local and international non-governmental actors engaged in a successful socialisation campaign with state and *sharia* courts and customary institutions on the importance of protecting the inheritance rights of women and children. Publications and educational videos were produced, with the involvement of local *sharia* and customary (*adat*) institutions, and road-shows were conducted in tsunami-affected villages.

The joint titling initiative used the opportunity of mass resettlement to change the property rights of women and children; advocacy with judicial institutions took advantage of the need to support these institutions in dealing with so many inheritance cases to bring to the fore long-neglected rights in state, *sharia* and customary systems. Both of these are examples of trying to rebuild without building back vulnerability, and also of build back better as transforming relationships and institutions. However, most of the other projects that were given the label ‘BBB’ were really an attempt to improve emergency and reconstruction response. Indeed, agencies often blurred the distinction between build back better and what was simply good practice. Community participation, women’s empowerment and accountability, for example, were all at times labelled as building back better.

## 2.5 Conclusion

While the term ‘build back better’ was used widely in Aceh, it meant vastly different things to different actors. For the government of Indonesia, build back better was not only about reconstructing safer housing and improved infrastructure; it was also about peace between Jakarta and GAM, as well as building trust between the central government and the local authorities and local communities. For the BRR, build back better also meant reforming governance in Indonesia through institutional innovations that put transparency, effective delivery and accountability at the centre. For development donors and agencies, build back better was linked to the availability of ‘additional’ resources. For humanitarian agencies, it was conceived of not so much in terms of physical reconstruction, but more in terms of the empowerment of local communities

through a wide range of programmatic interventions. In many cases, though, there was nothing distinctly new about what was called build back better, and actual interventions largely built on existing 'good practice' in the humanitarian sector. The massive amounts of funding available at once created opportunities to go

beyond standard life-saving response, but also subjected agencies to intensive pressure to spend large amounts of money quickly, providing the time neither for deeper analysis nor for longer-term programme implementation and exit strategies that might have ensured a higher level of sustainability.



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# 3 Post-Nargis Myanmar: building bridges of trust

## 3.1 Context

Cyclone Nargis struck Myanmar on 2–3 May 2008, causing widespread destruction and devastation across the Ayeyarwady Delta. The cyclone was the deadliest ever recorded in the North Indian Ocean Basin and the second-deadliest tropical storm of all time. According to government of Myanmar figures, Nargis left some 140,000 people dead or unaccounted for, 800,000 homeless and some 20,000 injured. (Trocaire and MMRD, 2011). Some 2.4m people, one-third of the entire population of Ayeyarwady and Yangon divisions, were affected. The cyclone devastated fishing and farming communities across the affected area, destroyed some 700,000 homes and caused severe damage to critical infrastructure. More than 75% of hospitals and clinics were destroyed, power lines were severed, roads and bridges were destroyed, three-quarters of livestock were killed and half of the region's fishing fleet was damaged (ASEAN, 2010). More than a million acres of rice paddy in the region known as the country's 'rice bowl' were destroyed by seawater (Trocaire and MMRD, 2011).

The cyclone occurred in the context of strained relations between the government of Myanmar and Western donors, many of whom had imposed a range of economic, financial and travel sanctions against Myanmar following the regime's crackdown on pro-democracy activists in 1988, and its refusal to honour the results of parliamentary elections in 1990. Most official development assistance (ODA) from OECD countries had been suspended, along with financial support from international finance institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). While Myanmar retained its membership within these institutions, it had been in non-accrual status with the World Bank since 1998, and had not received loans or technical assistance from the ADB since 1988 (US Department of State, 2008). At the time of the cyclone, ODA to Myanmar was very low, with the majority

of foreign assistance coming from Asian countries, particularly Japan, China and India. According to the OECD, in 2007 Myanmar received \$197m in ODA, around \$4 per capita, less than any of the world's 50 poorest countries. Neighbouring Cambodia and Laos, countries with similar levels of poverty, received \$47 and \$68 per capita in foreign aid respectively in 2007 (IRIN, 2009).

The UN also had an uneasy relationship with the Burmese authorities. While less restricted than the international financial institutions, UN agencies had also come under pressure from Western governments to restrict the mandate and scope of their programmes in Myanmar. In 1992, the UN Development Programme (UNDP)'s Governing Council imposed an extraordinary mandate in Myanmar, restricting the agency's activities to programmes with 'grassroots-level impact in the areas of health, education, food security, HIV/AIDS and the environment', and effectively preventing UNDP from engaging the government directly in development programmes. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) was not present at all in Myanmar when Nargis hit, as the then UN Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator had been expelled in November 2007 after angering the regime by saying that anti-government protests reflected public anger at increasing levels of poverty in the country (Financial Times, 2007).

When Cyclone Nargis struck, strained relations between Myanmar and the international community contributed to the government's reluctance to ask for international assistance. The response by national actors, however, was immediate: the government's National Disaster Preparedness Central Committee (NDPCC), chaired by the Prime Minister, declared a state of emergency in cyclone-affected areas, quickly dispatched search and rescue teams and organised the distribution of emergency relief supplies. At the local level, community organisations, religious associations, local businesses, schools and ordinary citizens mobilised funds and in-kind assistance.



While the national response was supported by the new acting UN Humanitarian Coordinator, in general international aid workers faced tight restrictions on access to the Delta (GPPi and Groupe URD, 2010). As information began to trickle out to the outside world and the extent of the damage became clearer, international concern grew that the government, at best, lacked the capacity to respond effectively to the disaster, and, at worst, was actively blocking international humanitarian assistance. On 7 May, then French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner proposed that the UN Security Council invoke the Responsibility to Protect principle to allow for the immediate delivery of humanitarian aid without the consent of the government, a position that was echoed by some European and US diplomats and commentators but flatly rejected by China and the UK, as well as by the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, Sir John Holmes (Asia-Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2008).

### 3.2 ASEAN's 'baptism by cyclone'

Restrictions on access were much less of a problem for Myanmar's neighbours in ASEAN. In the days following the cyclone, ASEAN Secretary-General Dr Surin Pitsuwan called on all member states to provide urgent relief assistance through the framework of the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER). On 6 May the government of Myanmar formally called for international assistance, and a few days later agreed to accept an ASEAN Emergency Rapid Assessment Team (ERAT) mission, which deployed to Myanmar from 9–18 May, in the first-ever such mission for ASEAN (Cr'each and Fan, 2008). Thus, international assistance was accepted, albeit selectively: the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon expressed his concern at the 'unacceptably slow response', while ASEAN member states were already sending assessment teams and medical missions to the country (APC for R2P, 2008; Moe Thuzar, 2011).

Recognising that ASEAN was being granted access more swiftly than other members of the international community, Ban held a meeting with ASEAN member states on 15 May to discuss the possibility of establishing a joint UN–ASEAN coordination hub and holding a joint donor conference in the region. A Special ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Singapore agreed to establish an ASEAN-led coordinating

mechanism to 'facilitate the effective distribution and utilisation of assistance from the international community, including the expeditious and effective deployment of relief workers, especially health and medical personnel'. On 21 May, Ban met then Myanmar Prime Minister Thein Sein in Yangon, and two days later he secured a breakthrough agreement with Than Shwe to allow access to all aid workers. Ban and Pitsuwan jointly launched the ASEAN–UN partnership at Don Mueang airport in Bangkok on 24 May before returning to Yangon for a pledging conference the following day.

The decision taken in Singapore to establish an ASEAN-led coordinating mechanism was in no small part driven by ASEAN's concern that its own credibility was being challenged by Myanmar's reluctance to grant wider access to international aid. Pitsuwan recounted how Myanmar's choices were presented by then Indonesian Foreign Minister Hasan Wirayuda:

*There are three options available to Myanmar. First is for Myanmar to resist the call and the world will barge in, based on the principle of 'responsibility to protect'. Second, Myanmar will have to deal with the United Nations alone because the world will not helplessly tolerate the suffering of millions. And the third is ASEAN and Myanmar facing the world together and conducting an orderly flow of personnel and materials for the rescue effort and the recovery later on (Bangkok Post, 2012).*

Faced with these scenarios, Myanmar accepted ASEAN's offer of support in facilitating international assistance and coordinating the post-cyclone recovery effort.

ASEAN looked to the BRR experience in Aceh to develop its strategy of engagement. The international sanctions regime on Myanmar meant that there was no expectation of a massive flow of relief funds as in post-tsunami Indonesia, and it was clear that international donors would not have the same trust in the government of Myanmar as in Indonesia to manage and coordinate the relief and reconstruction effort. There was therefore no intention of recreating a BRR-like institution for Myanmar, but it was felt that expertise could be drawn from the BRR in order to guide an institutional approach that would be fitting for Myanmar. Advised by member states,

particularly Indonesia, ASEAN designed a two-tier coordination mechanism consisting of a diplomatic body, the ASEAN Humanitarian Task Force (AHTF), and the Yangon-based Tripartite Core Group (TCG), consisting of ASEAN, the Myanmar government and the United Nations, to facilitate day-to-day operations.

For ASEAN, the role it played in the Nargis response was unprecedented. It was also a test of the organisation's relevance. Pitsuwan defined the humanitarian mission as a double challenge: 'to build back better for both of us, for Myanmar and for ASEAN'. The twin task facing ASEAN was to restore the Delta to 'its traditional role as the rice bowl not only of Myanmar but of Southeast Asia' and to forge 'a new model of humanitarian partnership' for the Southeast Asia region. ASEAN, in the words of Pitsuwan, was being 'baptised' by Cyclone Nargis (ASEAN, 2008).

Nargis occurred at a defining moment for ASEAN, just months after member states had adopted the first ASEAN Charter, and provided it with 'a window of opportunity to make meaningful progress on the goals of the Charter' (ASEAN, 2010), applying its emerging regional framework on disaster management in a real-life post-disaster recovery situation (Sabandar, 2010). Myanmar was an opportunity for ASEAN precisely because of the lack of trust between the government and Western donors. ASEAN saw that it potentially had a unique ability to act as a bridge between the two sides. From the very start, then, building trust and strengthening relationships were at the centre of ASEAN's concern in the Nargis recovery effort – and, more than that, in the role that it saw for itself as an actor on the international stage.

### 3.3 Baselines and common ground

Donors that attended the pledging conference in Yangon on 25 May made two main demands on the government: to permit unfettered access to cyclone-affected areas, and to conduct a credible needs assessment in cooperation with the international community. Access for humanitarian workers was facilitated by the TCG, which granted nearly 4,000 visas during the emergency relief period. The TCG also conducted the needs assessment donors had called for (the Post-Nargis Joint Assessment (PONJA)). Launched on 8 June 2008, the PONJA involved the

Myanmar government, ASEAN, the UN, international financial institutions and international NGOs. Over 300 people, divided into 32 teams, spent ten days touring the cyclone-affected area – areas previously effectively closed to foreigners.

Following the PONJA, ASEAN created a monitoring unit to measure the progress of the humanitarian response. ASEAN personnel were dispatched to pre-established UN hubs in the field and commenced joint planning with the Myanmar government for the early recovery period, culminating in the Post-Nargis Recovery and Preparedness Plan (PONREPP), outlining a three-year strategy from 2009 to 2011. Regular Periodic Reviews and Social Impact Monitoring exercises were designed to evaluate the progress of the recovery effort. The review process, like the PONJA, was intended to capture the efforts of every stakeholder, from government programmes to private sector initiatives and local spontaneous action, as a complement to the cluster monitoring systems. In a country where socio-economic data was not reliable and where mistrust between the government and Western states had rendered humanitarian engagement difficult prior to the cyclone, the joint assessment and recovery planning process became a means of simultaneously developing a critical baseline of needs against which recovery progress could be measured, and a means of building trust between the international community and the Myanmar authorities.

### 3.4 Local responses, local resources

With the international media focusing on the difficulties of access for international aid, less attention was paid to the scale and diversity of national and local responses. Besides the quick response by the government's NDPCC, the armed forces (*Tatmadaw*) played an important role in search and rescue operations, the establishment of temporary settlements and the provision of logistics, transport and personnel. The government immediately set aside an emergency response package of Kyat 50bn (\$45m), and the Myanmar business community contributed more than \$63m towards relief and reconstruction activities (FAO, 2009). Businesses were involved at many levels, from supplying food and non-food items to supporting distribution networks and building new hospitals and schools.

More impressive than the financial contribution was the scale of mobilisation, particularly at the local level. In the aftermath of Nargis, ‘literally thousands of local groups and individuals distributed essential relief’, including local religious networks, village- and township-based associations and local businesses (ICVA, 2010). Local responders reported how the Nargis response allowed people to cross ethnic, religious and class divides, and brought people together in ways that had not been thought possible before. According to one respondent, ‘this was one of the first times that something has happened which has caused a breaking down of barriers between religions’ (Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, 2010). This mobilisation of local groups was ‘of particular significance in the Myanmar context where civil society is struggling with the impact of decades of civil war and division amongst identity groups such as clan, ethnicity, religion, or geographic/religious affiliation or a mixture of these’ (*ibid.*). It also surprised many international observers, who had assumed that civil society in the country was moribund.

While local responses built new alliances and partnerships, they were also based on existing local networks, institutions, traditions and values, in particular religious values and institutions (Trocaire and MMRD, 2011). Local humanitarian responses of this kind have been seen in Myanmar since Nargis, for instance after Cyclone Giri in Rakhine State in October 2010 and in the response to an earthquake in Shan State in March 2011. Whether or not these responses were common before Nargis, it is certainly true that the international community has become much more aware of them since. More importantly, many new forms of organisation emerged during the Nargis response (what has been called a ‘bigger, more complex and more integrated’ civic space in Myanmar (CPCS 2010)), and this momentum has been maintained.

The emergence of an active network of local responders, combined with the significant constraints faced by international agencies in direct implementation, provided ‘the perfect opportunity for agencies to change their way of working, by supporting local initiatives through or alongside their own operations’ (Hedlund and Su, 2008). Prior to the cyclone, there had already been a small number of initiatives focusing on capacity-building of local and community-based organisations. With the local response to the disaster proving to be swifter and more effective than international assistance, some

actors saw an opportunity for these initiatives to be strengthened and scaled up. On 8 May, a number of donors, international and national NGOs and capacity-building projects came together to plan how to support civil society’s contribution to the Nargis response. As a result, the Local Resource Centre (LRC) was established, with a mandate to link local organisations to donor funds and technical expertise; to provide support to local NGOs in proposal writing, monitoring and evaluation, reporting and procuring supplies; to facilitate information exchange between the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) coordinating bodies and local NGOs and other civil society groups; to advocate to both the government and the international community on behalf of local organisations; to provide local NGOs with information and training on humanitarian principles and standards; and to monitor funded activities (Hedlund and Su, 2008). The LRC quickly became an important hub connecting local organisations to the international community. Weekly meetings with local organisations were often attended by more than 40 organisations.

The broad cooperation between international and local actors in the Nargis response allowed for new networks to be forged, for cooperation and trust-building across divides with both internal and external actors, and for the development of innovative strategies, such as the integration of rural–urban support networks and the bringing together of communities, local authorities and international humanitarian actors to plan, implement and monitor joint recovery programmes (Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, 2010). That said, the degree to which change has been achieved should not be overstated. Some in the humanitarian community noted that, while there was innovative thinking around the use of limited resources to support local groups, the vast majority struggled to maximise emerging opportunities to support and build partnerships with local networks. According to Andrew Kirkwood, then Country Director of Save the Children (the largest INGO in the country before Nargis) the humanitarian community ‘largely missed an opportunity to do something really innovative on a large scale because the system as a whole was not able to adapt to support new ways of working that really put local actors in the driver’s seat’ (Interview with Andrew Kirkwood, 2012). As Hedlund and Su (2008) put it: ‘in the end, those few who normally work with partners did so, while those who directly implement stuck as far as possible to their standard operating procedures’. Nargis, then,

may have brought change for Burmese organisations, but perhaps less so for the international sector.

### 3.5 Reducing disaster risk

Cyclone Nargis exposed the fact that the Ayeyarwady Delta is highly disaster-prone. As such, the post-Nargis response was seen as an opportunity to ‘build back safer’ by reducing communities’ vulnerability to future disasters. This involved standard DRR interventions: education on disaster preparedness and risk reduction; the establishment of Village Disaster Management Committees; training in search and rescue, first aid and early warning; the construction of cyclone shelters in the Delta and the integration of DRR into recovery interventions. Some organisations, such as Mercy Malaysia, worked on integrating DRR into the health sector. Meanwhile, the business community began to work more concertedly on risk prevention and reduction. Some major construction companies began to educate the smaller companies they worked with about building codes and seismic resistance, and the construction of schools and hospitals which could also be used as cyclone shelters.

The government of Myanmar was, of course, aware of the threat of disasters before Nargis. (In recent years storms and floods had affected tens of thousands of people.) The country ratified the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) in 2006, and had a national committee responsible for disaster preparedness and response under the Prime Minister. However, the realisation by the government of the limitations of its capacity to respond in the face of such a large disaster galvanised a determination to invest more attention in disaster management, including DRR. This is illustrated by the development of the Myanmar Action Plan for Disaster Risk Reduction, Preparedness, Relief and Rehabilitation (MAPDRR), the drafting of a national disaster management law and national building codes, as well as programmes to mainstream disaster risk reduction into the health and education sectors.

The MAPDRR is intended to provide a framework for the implementation of Myanmar’s regional and global commitments to DRR and establish a common mechanism for the implementation and monitoring of DRR initiatives in the country. The plan was developed by a taskforce comprising 12 government ministries, the Myanmar Red Cross

Society, OCHA, UNDP, ASEAN and the Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre (ADPC), within the framework of the Asian Ministerial Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction and the ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management (ACDM). The Action Plan was a fulfilment of Myanmar’s obligations under the AADMER, and many agencies saw the process as a landmark in cooperation between the government, local communities and international agencies – a sign that, as a result of Nargis, Myanmar was taking risk reduction, early warning, emergency preparedness and response very seriously, as well as a reaffirmation of its engagement in and commitment to regional and international processes, mechanisms and protocols on disaster management.

### 3.6 Restoring the rice bowl of the region

The agriculture sector, the mainstay of the economy in the Ayeyarwady Delta, was not in good shape even before Cyclone Nargis. Myanmar’s rural economy was already afflicted by low levels of investment and high levels of poverty, indebtedness and landlessness. While agriculture provided 70% of employment and accounted for 50% of the country’s GDP, it received a mere 1% of the country’s formal credit, essential for investment (Asia Society, 2010; Harvard, 2009).

The agricultural sector was hit hard by the cyclone. Livestock drowned, more than 783,000 hectares of paddy fields were submerged, over 700,000 tonnes of stored rice was destroyed and 85% of seed stocks were lost (FAO, 2009). Household indebtedness, already high before the cyclone, rose dramatically, affecting virtually all farmers in the Delta. One study found that economic conditions in the Delta in the aftermath of Nargis were ‘the worst [villagers] could ever recall’ (Harvard, 2009). Because of high levels of landlessness, many households relied on wage labour to survive. However, in the wake of the cyclone the chances of finding work were even more limited than usual, which meant that households had ‘little or no margin left’ to support recovery (Harvard, 2009).

The decades’ old problem of rural poverty had been exacerbated by underinvestment by the national government, and the destruction caused by the cyclone prompted recognition that the problems of the rural economy could no longer be ignored. The

agriculture sector was recognised by some national and international actors alike as being of major importance in the recovery process, and attention was needed not only to overall food production, but also to rural livelihoods. This concern for the livelihoods of the rural poor manifested itself in the Livelihoods and Food Security Trust Fund (LIFT), a multi-donor fund set up in 2009. LIFT was established by a number of key donors, including Australia, Denmark, the EU, France, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States, as a mechanism to channel aid to a range of partners with the goal of improving the food and livelihood security of the poorest and most vulnerable communities in Myanmar.

The process of setting up LIFT was donor-led, and was based on an earlier multi-donor fund for health known as the 3 Diseases Fund (the '3D Fund'). This was seen as a model not only for improving conditions in specific sectors, but also as a way to gain traction with the government through dialogue and engagement on specific policies and programmes. In this way, donors saw LIFT, both as a mechanism for building more resilient rural livelihoods in the disaster-prone Delta, and as a way of opening up a broader dialogue with the government. Donors pressed for LIFT to focus first and foremost on poverty in the Delta. The government agreed with the focus on rural poverty, but resisted a piecemeal project approach and argued that the priority for assistance was not specifically the Delta, but should also include other vulnerable areas that had been largely spared the destruction of the cyclone (and the aid that followed it).

The government's own emerging vision for the Delta – later encapsulated in the 'Ayeyarwady Delta Development 2020' plan (ADD), released in 2010 – called for a very different, ten-year process harnessing a 'public-private partnership [that] could result in a win-win situation for all stakeholders (government, private enterprises and the people)'. The government's idea was that post-Nargis recovery offered an opportunity to energise the long-term economic development of the Delta, and 'contribute effectively to a secured sustainable development of the market economic system in the Delta and the country as a whole' (Ayeyarwady Delta Development 2020, 2010). After several months, agreement was reached that the first year of LIFT-funded projects would be implemented in the Delta, and that the fund would in subsequent years expand its scope to other priority areas.

Some of the agencies implementing LIFT-funded projects incorporated what they explicitly called a 'build back better' approach (FAO, 2009; Metta Foundation, 2010), by which they meant aiming to make livelihoods in the Delta more resilient to future shocks. Strategies included increasing and diversifying production, improving the management of natural resources and rehabilitating mangroves, supporting village-level technical and financial services and making agricultural institutions more efficient (FAO, 2009). Despite the use of the new language of build back better, however, there was nothing intrinsically new about these interventions or approaches, which in the past would have come under the label of sustainable livelihoods. In effect, agencies tended to use build back better, not to describe anything substantively novel, but rather as a new label that served to underline the importance of issues, approaches and initiatives in which they were already engaged.

### 3.7 Conclusion

In the Aceh response, the language of build back better was explicitly used to describe, not just physical rehabilitation, but transformative structural changes in politics and social relations: actors like the BRR saw in the unprecedented scale of the tsunami response an opportunity to transform Acehnese society and galvanise and support peace. The rhetoric of build back better was much less in evidence in the Nargis response, and when it was used it tended to refer to longstanding areas of work more usually gathered under the headings of DRR and livelihoods, rather than signifying much in the way of new or innovative approaches. Even so, there were attempts to make some of the same kinds of transformation, albeit on a very different scale, and ASEAN, the central actor in the process of international political change, did sometimes use the language of build back better to describe its role in using the response to create a political bridge between Myanmar and the outside world. Relationship-building in the relief effort was demonstrated by the decision to have the Myanmar government chair the TCG; the conduct of the joint needs assessment; and the attempt to link recovery efforts to the development plans of key Myanmar line ministries. The atmosphere of greater cooperation engendered in the wake of Nargis also made possible a dialogue on such a sensitive and long-standing issue as rural poverty, and Myanmar's institutional links with the region were deepened and expanded through its



participation in regional mechanisms for disaster risk reduction and response.

Many actors felt that the post-Nargis response did have some effect on wider governance reform, even if indirectly, and some recognised that the Nargis response provided unprecedented opportunities to build new working relationships with various actors within the government. Some built on relationships forged during the Nargis response to develop long-term programmes to support Myanmar's development and integration into the regional economy. The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia-Pacific (ESCAP), for example, spearheaded a 'Development Partnership' series, which included a high-level policy dialogue on economic policies for growth and poverty reduction featuring Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz, and a workshop on public-private partnerships for development (ESCAP, 2010). Similarly, ASEAN has been engaging Myanmar in the framework of regional integration and technical assistance for the new and less-developed ASEAN member states (known as the 'CMLV' sub-grouping). Regional actors perceive the current wave of reforms as an opportunity to close the development gaps between Myanmar and its neighbours, and to bring Myanmar further into the international fold.

However, many years of mistrust between the government and the international community will not be easily dispelled. While the Nargis response did open up opportunities for aid programmes in the Delta and new forms of engagement with local and regional actors, raising funds for recovery remained a challenge due to ongoing perceptions of the difficulty of effectively delivering aid in Myanmar and

continuing sanctions against the government. More than a year after the disaster, only \$100m had been raised out of the \$691m called for in the Post-Nargis Recovery and Preparedness Plan. By January 2011, the level of overseas development assistance (including humanitarian assistance) had dropped to pre-Nargis levels, despite a worldwide ODA increase, standing at \$5 per capita (IRIN, 2011). Given the scale of the need, the shortfall in shelter assistance is particularly striking. An estimated 800,000 people were displaced by the cyclone (PONJA, 2008), but, unlike Aceh, shelter was never made a priority by donors. By February 2010 only one donor (Norway) had committed any funds to shelter (UN-HABITAT, 2010), and in May 2011, three years after Nargis, the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) reported that 62% of households in the Delta were living in shelter not resilient to cyclones, including temporary shelters. This reluctance to fund shelter projects was largely due to donors' concerns about supporting construction on government-owned land, an example of the difficulties that remained in building trust between donors and the Myanmar government in the post-Nargis context.

Aceh and Myanmar were unique cases in terms of the management of the post-disaster recovery process. In the former, the national government led the response; in the latter, the lead was taken by ASEAN, in cooperation with the Myanmar government. Build back better, then, was shaped within the respective frameworks established by these authorities. In our last case study, Haiti, the post-earthquake recovery effort was largely driven by international humanitarian actors. This shaped the conditions through which build back better was conceived, articulated and deployed in the aftermath of the earthquake.





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# 4 Post-earthquake Haiti: shifting ground or standing still?

## 4.1 Context

On 12 January 2010, an earthquake measuring 7.3 on the Richter scale struck Haiti, just 17km south-west of the capital, Port-au-Prince. The earthquake, the most powerful to strike the country in 200 years and the most destructive urban disaster in recent history, left a trail of destruction in its wake. The government estimated that 222,570 people were killed, more than 300,500 people injured and more than 1.3m left homeless (UN Office of the Special Envoy website).

The earthquake struck at the heart of Haiti's most densely populated area, as well as its economic and administrative centre. An estimated 60% of the country's administrative and economic infrastructure, 20% of its schools and 50% of its hospitals were damaged or destroyed (IHRC, 2011; OSE website). Port-au-Prince suffered extreme damage, and 80% of Leogane, the town closest to the earthquake's epicentre, was destroyed. The official post-disaster needs assessment estimated the value of damage and losses at \$7.8bn, slightly higher than the country's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2009 (GoH, 2010). Seventy per cent of these losses were suffered by the private sector, with housing being the most severely affected sector.

The earthquake not only caused massive destruction; it also exacerbated an already dire socio-economic situation. With over 67% of the population living on less than \$2 a day, Haiti was the poorest country in the Western hemisphere. Almost 60% of the population was undernourished and only 58% had access to clean water and sanitation (Oxfam, 2010; OSE website). Haiti was also extremely food insecure before the earthquake. The country had produced all its own rice until 1994, when the IMF compelled the government to remove trade barriers and reduce tariffs on imported rice from 35% to 3% (Inside Disaster; Dubois, 2012). The country was flooded with cheap rice imports from the United States, forcing many Haitian rice farmers out of business and increasing the

country's dependence on food aid. As a result, 80% of Haiti's export earnings were used to buy food imports (Inside Disaster). In addition, at the time of the earthquake the country was still suffering the effects of a series of deadly tropical storms in 2008.

## 4.2 A 'Marshall Plan' for Haiti?

Soon after the earthquake, many began to believe that the disaster might offer a historic opportunity to build back better. The preface to the Haitian government's Action Plan for National Recovery and Development, issued immediately after the earthquake, captured the essence of this idea: Haitian President Rene Preval famously called the earthquake 'a rendezvous with history that Haiti cannot miss'. Bill Clinton, who had been appointed as UN Special Envoy for Haiti in 2009, was among others who saw 'a moment of opportunity' to '[build] what [Haitians] want their country to be – a nation that finally reflects their desires and their dreams' (Clinton Foundation, 2010). According to Dominique Strauss-Kahn, then Managing Director of the IMF:

*Today, the urgent immediate priority is to save the people of Haiti. In a few weeks, it will be reconstruction. We must be prepared to think on as massive a scale as then US Secretary of State George C. Marshall did after World War II. If we seize this chance, we can help the people of Haiti escape their cycle of poverty and deprivation (Strauss-Kahn, 2010).*

Analysts looked for lessons from the Aceh experience: the BRR was presented as a model reconstruction agency, and the Multi-Donor Fund a model for donor coordination; the importance of beginning recovery efforts alongside relief activities was emphasised; and the need for urban risk mapping and settlement planning was raised. The Action Plan for National Recovery and Development, presented at the donor conference in New York in March 2010, was seen

not just as an earthquake reconstruction plan, but as a plan to rebuild the very foundations of the country, seeking to bring about a ‘qualitative leap’ for Haiti within 20 years (USAID website). The Plan, which envisioned \$3.9bn in new development projects, called for several levels of reconstruction:

- ‘territorial rebuilding’, encompassing the creation of development zones, the expansion of a national transport network, watershed management and comprehensive disaster risk management;
- ‘economic rebuilding’, including investment in the agricultural sector, expanded access to credit, support to small and medium enterprises and the development of a robust private sector, increased access to electricity and an increased role for the diaspora in economic development activities;
- ‘social rebuilding’, including temporary and permanent housing, the creation of labour-intensive jobs, universal health and education and social protection; and
- ‘institutional rebuilding’, involving the restructuring and relaunching of the public administration, rule of law and the creation of transparent, accountable and democratic institutions (GoH, 2010).

At the New York conference, \$5.33bn was pledged by 55 bilateral and multilateral donors for the period 2010–2012, in addition to \$994.5m in debt relief. In total, \$8.27bn was pledged for programmes between 2010 and 2020 (OSE, 2012: 8). However, significant challenges would lie ahead in implementing Strauss-Kahn’s vision of a Haitian ‘Marshall Plan’ in a country where foreign assistance had failed to achieve its goals for decades (Buss, 2008). As Jonathan Katz puts it: ‘the question was: Could aid be handled differently from before? Would reconstruction be done to Haiti or by Haiti?’ (Katz, 2013: 112).

## 4.3 Bypassing the state

*A borrowed drum never makes good dancing.*  
Haitian proverb

Humanitarian and development actors identified many challenges that needed to be addressed if Haiti were indeed to be built back better: the distrust and lack of solidarity between the government and its citizens; Haiti’s profound land tenure and settlement problems; the scant attention that had been given to disaster risk reduction and preparedness in general,

and the focus on hurricanes rather than earthquakes. At the perceived root of all these challenges, however, lay the primary problem of inequality, poor governance and weak public institutional capacity (Buss, 2008). This had long been widely recognised: ‘without improved governance and institutional reforms, the World Bank and other donors will be able to accomplish very little’ (World Bank, 2002). A report by Progressio, a UK-based NGO, argued that ‘some Haitian intellectuals argue that Haiti lives under a “culture of exclusion” which systematically denies the vast majority of Haiti’s people access to power or wealth. In order to “build back better”, Haiti needs to tackle these embedded exclusionary practices and develop a culture of integration’ (Progressio, 2010).

Agencies that sought to build back better in Haiti in the aftermath of the earthquake saw its vulnerability as a product of its political environment. The common perception was that Haitian politics had been characterised by dictatorship, political violence, fraudulent elections, exclusion from political processes, stark socio-economic inequality and the denial of basic rights to the majority of the population. There is, however, an alternative narrative of Haiti’s political history, one that underlines not Haitians’ suffering and impoverishment, but rather their resilience, innovation and self-reliance. According to this (less prominent) view, the defining theme in Haiti’s history is not the failure of the state and the misery of the Haitian people, but the steadfast refusal of ordinary Haitian men and women, descendants of slaves, to be controlled by the state (Bell, 2001; Asante, 2011; Dubois, 2012). According to this view, in the years that followed independence an autonomous form of social organisation emerged, based around the highly egalitarian ‘*lakou*’ system of customary ownership, a complex ‘anti-plantation’ agricultural system and a network of dispersed and dynamic markets (Dubois, 2012). Had such alternative understandings of agency and resilience been explored, build back better interventions aiming to build resilience might have looked very different, with an emphasis on finding ways to increase people’s agency rather than providing aid to a population portrayed as exploited, impoverished and utterly disempowered.

The weak capacity of public institutions was partly related to the ways in which foreign aid had historically been delivered (Sedky in Farmer, 2011:

357). Rather than supporting local institutions, aid in Haiti had tended to be channelled through parallel systems. NGOs often determined interventions to address problems that they had identified, and did so without the involvement of Haitians, either from the government or local communities. The Haitian government felt little ownership over aid programmes when it was prevented from administering them, and when it felt that its involvement was token (Buss, 2008; Farmer, 2011). Consequently, ‘the results of the work often did little to make lasting change in Haiti or, in many cases, to even help Haitians’ (Farmer, 2011: 357).

While the problem of weak state institutions had been recognised, less attention had been paid to the link between their weakness and the way in which they had been marginalised or even undermined by aid itself. If, as widely agreed, what was needed after the earthquake was not only to build back physical infrastructure but also to build stronger public institutions that could manage public resources and deliver basic public services, build back better would need to be based on changing the way that aid itself was channelled and what it focused on. In this view, the immediate priorities were to ensure government ownership of aid programmes, and to build Haitian institutions with the capacity to coordinate and administer aid and deliver services more generally (Farmer, 2011; Buss, 2008). One must question, however, how much can be achieved by building state institutions if, as we have seen, individual Haitians tend not only to distrust the state, but also actively resist it.

There were some successes in persuading non-governmental agencies to channel their money differently. Jehane Sedky of the UN Office of the Special Envoy describes how, after several weeks of advocacy, Bill Clinton and Deputy Special Envoy Dr. Paul Farmer managed to convince Gail McGovern, CEO of the American Red Cross, to commit \$3.8m to support the Hôpital Université d’État l’Haïti (HUEH). The decision was a historic one for the American Red Cross: it marked the first time the agency had provided direct budget support to a government. Donors too were willing to consider doing things differently – up to a point. Despite general distrust of Haitian institutions, some donors and international partners seemed determined to make sure that the reconstruction effort was seen to be Haitian-led, and tried to find ways to work with proven partners. Thus, efforts were made to give the Haitian government more leadership in the

reconstruction process and to ensure that there was at least partial Haitian leadership of the Interim Haiti Recovery Commission (IHRC).

The IHRC was modelled on the BRR (Katz, 2013), and the same management consultancy (McKinsey) that had advised the Indonesian government was brought in – by the donors – to design it. However, in contrast to the BRR, a government entity vested with a high level of authority, authority within the IHRC was shared between the Haitian government and its international donors. The majority of donors, and even some Haitian officials, did not consider Haiti ready to lead the reconstruction effort on its own (Katz, 2013). As a result, the IHRC was never regarded by the government as a Haitian institution: it was not invested in or, worse, was undermined by the Haitian government from the start (NYT, 2012; Katz, 2013: 137). Following the earthquake, former directors of the BRR wrote a ‘white paper’ offering the Haitian government key lessons based on their experience of the reconstruction process in Aceh and Nias (BRR, 2010), stressing the importance of a government-led reconstruction effort and communicating Indonesia’s readiness to help. The Indonesian government was in fact ready to send BRR experts to Haiti to support the Haitian government in managing the reconstruction effort, if requested. In the end, however, the request never came. Operationally too, the IHRC faced multiple challenges which undermined it from the very beginning. There were major delays in establishing it, and there was insufficient management experience and authority among key personnel; board members did not supervise its performance closely enough and were not able to hold it accountable for delivering on work-plans (Interview with Leitmann, 2012).

The same limitations in translating good intentions to do things differently that were evident institutionally with the IHRC were paralleled in patterns of aid disbursement more generally. The Office of the Special Envoy found that, by the end of 2012, the vast majority of funding was being channelled outside of state institutions (OSE, 2012). According to the OSE, by the end of 2012, out of the \$6.04bn disbursed in humanitarian and recovery funding, less than 10% (an estimated \$580m) had gone directly to the government. Non-governmental institutions fared no better: less than 0.6% (\$36.2m) was estimated to have been disbursed to Haitian non-government organisations and private businesses (OSE, 2012).

## 4.4 Displacing the local

Many humanitarian agencies also viewed the earthquake response as an opportunity to catalyse change in Haiti. Even agencies that were not familiar with Haiti before the earthquake believed that the injection of funding and international expertise would create an opportunity for Haitians to increase their capacity in all sectors and to be more directly involved in their own recovery and development. Some agencies felt that increased community involvement could lead to more fundamental structural changes in Haitian society, even extending to more informed decisions in the election of political representatives. In interviews, informants explicitly discussed such transformation in terms of build back better. In this view, strengthening public institutions is not merely about their technical capacity to manage resources and deliver services, but also about increasing the state's accountability to its people – and even, in theory, the ability of citizens to hold to account international aid agencies. A number of agencies, including the IFRC, the Communicating with Disaster-Affected Communities (CDAC) Network and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), tried to respond to the general issue of accountability through initiatives to improve communication between aid agencies and beneficiaries (in recognition of a right to information by Haitians); other agencies, such as Oxfam, tried to provide platforms for regular dialogue between local authorities and community-based groups.

Notwithstanding the importance of the recognition of the need for inclusion and accountability underlying these initiatives, the operational context in which the earthquake response unfolded presented major challenges to bridging the gap between international aid agencies and their beneficiaries, and with the representatives of the Haitian organisations which, according to these proponents of build back better, needed to be involved in planning the earthquake response. The designation of high security levels by the UN prevented most agencies from freely interacting with Haitians, whilst security procedures at the UN military (MINUSTAH) compound where most aid was coordinated, and the use of English in cluster meetings, led to a 'fortification' of the international community (Interview with ECHO, Brussels, 2012; Grünwald and Binder, 2010). This made it difficult for Haitians to attend coordination meetings, and reinforced the impression of an aid response from which the

majority of Haitians were excluded. Over time, some of these obstacles were recognised and addressed, at least partially. Nonetheless, a large proportion of the Haitian public felt doubly marginalised – by the Haitian state and by the international community.

## 4.5 Unstable foundations, unsettled futures

The emphasis on institution-building and on the transformation of aid relationships in the rhetoric of build back better should not be exaggerated. Another aspect, and in many ways the dominant one in practice, concerned physically rebuilding Haiti in a way that would make it resistant to future disasters, particularly earthquakes and hurricanes: literally building back better. This meant an emphasis on the physical and technical aspects of rebuilding, such as building codes, construction materials, zoning, risk mapping and settlement planning.

Although the aid effort was dominated by material assistance and physical construction – a limited vision of build back better – very little reconstruction was actually taking place at all. By the end of 2012, more than half of the \$6bn disbursed since the earthquake had gone to humanitarian relief, while a mere \$215m had been allocated to actual housing reconstruction. 'BBB' became an opportunity to push for a wide range of programmes not connected to the destruction of the earthquake, including the building of a teaching hospital in the central plateau and a new industrial park in the north (Sontag, 2012). 'Housing is difficult and messy,' explained Josef Leitmann, manager of the World Bank-administered Haiti Reconstruction Fund, 'and donors have shied away from it' (quoted in Sontag, 2012). So, while reconstruction money went to expensive non-shelter projects, shelter was left to humanitarian funds and agencies, which meant that it was subject to a fragmented 'clustered' approach, and the shelters that were built were not intended to be permanent. The effect was 'BBB by T-shelter', given that this was the primary transitional shelter response being supplied.

The initial emergency shelter response was viewed as a success: despite the scale of response required and the challenges of working in a densely populated urban environment with a destroyed physical and institutional infrastructure, people received the immediate life-saving shelter (i.e. tents and sheeting)

that was required to prevent further loss of life (EPYPSA, 2011). However, when it came to addressing more than urgent basic needs, there were heated debates and divergent views on a broader shelter strategy, on what a sustainable approach to shelter would look like in an urban environment and the extent to which the international community should be involved in reconstruction at all.

The IASC cluster system in Haiti struggled to develop a common strategy and maintain a consistent approach, with responsibility for coordinating ‘shelter’ interventions divided between at least four different clusters and numerous sub- and inter-cluster working groups. The Camp Coordination and Camp Management Cluster was responsible for camps and spontaneous settlements; the Shelter and Non-Food Items Cluster was tasked with the provision of transitional shelter; the Early Recovery Cluster’s *Logement Quartier* working group was in charge of debris removal, house repairs, permanent housing and settlement planning; and the Protection Cluster’s housing, land and property working group focused on advocacy concerning forced evictions, protection for renters and resettlement. This approach fragmented the shelter and housing agenda within the cluster system and arguably made it more difficult to develop a common perspective and strategy.

This fragmentation took place despite early, broad agreement within the sector that the response had to be comprehensive and integrated. The humanitarian architecture and its decision-making processes did not make such broad strategic cooperation easy, and because of the day-to-day demands of managing a response people fell into a ‘default’ setting of solution-focused siloed working (Levine, 2012). As an example of this, the ‘strategic’ advisory group (SAG) of the Shelter Cluster quickly decided that the primary focus should be on the distribution of the so-called ‘T-shelter’, a pre-fabricated construction designed to meet ‘transitional shelter needs’. This happened despite the fact that the transitional shelter strategy did not strictly limit temporary shelter interventions to T-shelters, and defined transitional shelter as a ‘habitable covered space and a secure living environment, with privacy and dignity for those within it during the period between the provision of emergency shelter and of permanent shelter’. Such an approach could have included a range of options, such as material assistance

to host families or direct cash transfers to households to support reconstruction or rental payments. Despite this, ‘the direct provision (construction) of transitional shelters was by far the most used option to give an interim solution, both in IDP camps and in the previous living sites’ (EPYPSA, 2011).

Having decided to abandon a strategic focus in favour of a technical solution, some agencies then tried to incorporate a build back better approach to T-shelter construction (for example using reinforced steel bars to increase hurricane resistance). Agency decisions around shelter seem to have been based partly on assumptions that there was a lack of rental stock in Port-au-Prince, and that the number of host families in the capital was not high, reflecting the lack of accurate data and analysis of needs and contextual conditions. In addition, agencies appeared to prefer T-shelter interventions for their higher degree of control over the ‘output’, and many were concerned over liability issues related to housing repair (EPYPSA, 2011: 45). However, the early and dominant focus on T-shelters pre-empted complementary and alternative approaches that might have been adopted to support host families (EPYPSA, 2011: 44).

The shelter response thus got stuck in a humanitarian coordination system which could not see beyond itself precisely when a comprehensive and long-term perspective on reconstruction was required from the beginning. Fragmented and narrowly defined, the system was unable to provide a platform for a common and continuous process of analysis of the context and review of strategies, and lacked the ability to remain flexible enough to create varying responses that corresponded to actual needs and conditions. Under such circumstances, build back better in the shelter sector was inevitably reduced to the question of building standards and the technical design of shelter ‘solutions’.

Haiti never experienced the kind of political commitment to build back better that was seen in Aceh and Myanmar. More so than in Aceh and Myanmar, the post-disaster recovery effort in Haiti was dominated by the international humanitarian system. However, the very architecture that had been designed to improve humanitarian response also undermined the ability of that response to engage in actual reconstruction at all, to say nothing of approaches that could be seen to be building back better.





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# 5 Conclusion

Like its conceptual predecessors, build back better has been welcomed as an important advance in efforts to link humanitarian assistance and broader developmental objectives in disaster-affected states. In all three case studies looked at here, respondents agreed with the intentions that underpinned it, and all saw its value in enhancing the longer-term impacts of humanitarian assistance. This is curious as the case studies also reveal that there was no common agreement on what build back better meant, or what it implied in terms of programming. Although the phrase was widely employed by humanitarian agencies in all three studies, there was little analysis of what ‘better’ might mean in specific circumstances, and agencies largely operated through existing frameworks, methodologies and programmatic interventions. Although humanitarian agencies did try to be innovative in their interventions, and to ensure that relief efforts supported and were linked to longer-term recovery, the very skills that enabled them to deliver life-saving and vital emergency relief arguably meant that they were not best placed to define and deliver on a build back better agenda.

This raises the question why the phrase (and the related concepts and approaches that precede it) has been so enthusiastically taken up within the sector. Part of the answer may relate to the obvious rightness of the proposition that, if disasters really do offer an opportunity to use humanitarian assistance to improve people’s lives, not just save them, then it is incumbent on humanitarian agencies to take advantage of that opportunity and seek to contribute to lasting change. It may also have a public-relations function as a rebuttal to persistent criticism of the efficacy, value and sustainability of the humanitarian enterprise. For donors and funders, building back better has obvious appeal because it raises the possibility that, next time around, disaster-hit societies will survive better, and therefore need less help. Much the same appeal is found in the resilience debate, through the widely held assumption that investment in building resilience to cope with risk and in risk reduction is more ‘cost-effective’ than expensive humanitarian responses, though there is to date little evidence to support this hypothesis (Venton et al., 2012).

None of this necessarily means that build back better could not be useful in framing assistance strategies in the wake of disaster. However, the case studies clearly show that, if it is to be meaningful, efforts to build back *better* – as distinct from building back *safer* – cannot be insulated from the surrounding political and social environment. If disasters can in some cases indeed present opportunities for long-term, sustainable change, as the proponents of build back better argue, then this must be about transforming power relations in a society, not (or at least not only) technical fixes like earthquake-resistant housing or drought-resistant seeds. The concept of build back better ought to raise the very question of which disasters do present opportunities for transformational change, and how different actors can respond to the political challenge of building back better in different ways depending on their skills, capacities, mandates and interests, and depending on the context. What is important is making explicit what is at stake in deciding to adopt build back better as a guiding principle of recovery, and being honest about the implications of that choice.

Attempting to make relief more effective and to leave the societies in which it is delivered better than they were before is surely far preferable to simply accepting that there is no room for improvement, and that the best that we can hope for is the restoration of the status quo ante. At the level of aspiration, in other words, build back better may be useful in driving forward a reflective discourse in favour of change, and in stimulating discussion and thinking about what needs to be done. It must be to the good for humanitarian agencies to think beyond the simple provision of relief assistance, and to meaningfully consider the longer-term potential – positive and negative – of their programmes. To that extent, build back better can be seen as part of an ongoing and open-ended intellectual conversation about the role and purpose of humanitarian assistance, and its relationship with other spheres of action after disaster. But what is the specific added value that build back better can bring to humanitarian and reconstruction actors involved in post-disaster recovery efforts? Is build back better simply another way of describing good humanitarian and development practice? In considering



this, two further questions arise. The first is whether build back better has been useful as a concept in guiding or mobilising humanitarian action and reconstruction. The second is what would be required to make the concept more strategically valuable for these actors.

In answering the first question, the case studies examined here show that build back better was, in fact, *not* a powerful force in orienting reconstruction across the board, if only because different actors used it or saw the priorities for where building back should be ‘better’ so differently. As discussed in the Aceh study, the Indonesian government used build back better not only to build physical and economic resilience but, more fundamentally, to change political relationships that were at the foundation of socio-economic vulnerability in the province, including through bringing the 30-year conflict in Aceh to an end. The UN and the World Bank mobilised build back better in terms of building local technical capacity in everything from aid coordination to public financial management. NGOs tended to use build back better to implement ‘best practice’ and ‘quality’ in their projects. In Myanmar, ASEAN used build back better to mean building trust between Myanmar and the international community and to strengthen its own reputation and emerging regional disaster management systems, while some NGOs saw build back better as a chance to increase space for humanitarian and development efforts and for engagement with local actors. In Haiti, in the absence of any fundamental transformation of relations between Haitian and international actors, build back better was mobilised largely to promote DRR and technical solutions, such as T-shelters. And at times it was used bureaucratically – as a way of spending ‘extra’ funding, for example – and often opportunistically, with various actors taking advantage of build back better to advance a particular agenda, approach or project.

This brings us to our second question: what would be required to make build back better a more strategically valuable concept for governments and humanitarian, reconstruction and development actors involved in post-disaster recovery? One proposition is that build back better can perhaps be more usefully mobilised as a flag, rather than a concept. In other words, it is a useful tool for creating a discourse about what needs to be done in a particular context, much as the term ‘resilience’ is arguably more useful as a mobiliser for orienting actors towards an analysis of whether

transformational change is possible, and if so how, rather than as a concept in and of itself. We have seen examples of the ways in which this happened in our case studies. In Aceh, the Indonesian government’s identification of peace-building as a goal of build back better allowed the BRR to work not only technically on reconstruction, but also politically to build trust between the central government and the Acehnese and to support broader, long-term national objectives. In Myanmar, the framing of agricultural recovery as being at least in part about building back better in the Delta was politically useful as a way of taking advantage of the new climate of engagement in order to act on food insecurity and rural poverty. In Haiti, there were hopes that build back better would mean ‘doing things differently’. The problem was that it was not entirely clear *how* to do things differently given the requirements and architecture of the international aid system, and build back better as a concept did not help to elucidate priorities or potential ways forward. Even when innovative approaches were initiated under the build back better label, such as the Local Resource Centre in Myanmar, it was not the concept of build back better that was responsible for this, but rather the presence of individuals and organisations who understood the local context and actors well enough to see what was needed and to recognise and act upon the opportunities that arose through the disaster response.

Build back better is arguably most strategic and meaningful when it is used to bring about or support a transformation of political relations, and much less strategic and meaningful when it is ‘merely’ about better materials and technical solutions. This is because even material and technical solutions are shaped by power relations, and not dealing with these power relations will only reproduce the status quo ante, with all its problems and inequities. Yet while a post-disaster situation may offer the opportunity to change political relations, is this necessarily the right time to do so? And even if it is, are the actors engaged in post-disaster response, particularly humanitarian actors, best placed to instigate and advance that change? There are two possible objections from humanitarian actors. The first is that, if build back better is indeed about politics, as we argue it is, then it may not be the role of humanitarians to get involved at all. The second is a concern that, in the context of an emergency, building back better could be a dangerous distraction from urgent life-saving priorities. From a non-humanitarian perspective, humanitarian actors (with their short-term skills, perspectives and funding windows) may not

be the best equipped to deal with slow-burning and nuanced political problems.

From our case studies, several tendencies can be identified in the way humanitarians engaged with build back better. Some agencies simply did not factor it into their work at all, whether as a result of funding limitations or because they did not see it as being part of their mandate. This approach could, on the one hand, be seen as short-termist. On the other, it could equally be argued that these agencies remained focused realistically and responsibly on the primary task of addressing urgent humanitarian needs, rather than being distracted by the vague and varied ambitions of build back better. It is also clear from the case studies that the political mobilisation of build back better in both Aceh and Myanmar was driven, not by humanitarian actors, but by semi-external and authoritative political entities: the Indonesian government, in the case of Aceh, and ASEAN, in the case of Myanmar. In both cases, there was a recognition of the need for a fundamental political transformation, and build back better was used as a banner to advance these broader objectives through the post-disaster recovery effort.

A key lesson, then, is that, rather than embracing build back better uncritically in post-disaster recovery efforts, humanitarian actors need to be aware that it has multiple dimensions, both technical and political, and may not be possible or advisable in every post-disaster context; there are many actors involved in almost all recovery efforts, and each will interpret build back better according to their priorities; and humanitarians need to understand their specific role within the overall effort. This means that, while in some cases it might not necessarily be the role of humanitarians themselves to engage in build back better, they should at least be ‘BBB-aware’: being cognisant of the potentially transformative effects of their assistance, in much the same way as the principles of ‘do no harm’ call for an awareness of the potentially detrimental effects of aid. This paper has argued that build back better’s most important dimension is the transformation of political relationships. If that is the case, then humanitarians should know the implications of embracing it, and make an informed choice about whether or not to do so. This paper is an attempt to make more explicit what is at stake in that choice.



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Humanitarian Policy Group  
Overseas Development Institute  
203 Blackfriars Road  
London SE1 8NJ  
United Kingdom

Tel. +44 (0) 20 7922 0300  
Fax. +44 (0) 20 7922 0399  
E-mail: [hpgadmin@odi.org](mailto:hpgadmin@odi.org)  
Website: <http://www.odi.org/hpg>

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