Why Representation Matters in Disaster Recovery

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The British Academy
GCRF Policy Briefing Series

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The Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) is a £1.5 billion fund that supports researchers seeking to address challenges faced by developing countries, and forms part of the UK's Official Development Assistance (ODA). The GCRF addresses the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

The British Academy runs programmes through the GCRF that are challenge-led and interdisciplinary. The Academy also has a strong emphasis through the GCRF in strengthening capacity for research and supporting equitable partnerships. This briefing comes from an award in the Academy's Sustainable Development Programme 2018.

Below: Resettlement site under construction in Ganjam, Odisha, to rehouse families after Cyclone Phailin

Photo: Zohrab Reys Gamat

Introduction

Disaster impacts are never short-term. The crisis does not come to an end when the immediate physical effects of a hazard cease or when the last survivors have been rescued, buildings have been made safe, relief supplies have been set in place, and the news cameras have moved elsewhere. Impacts on lives, livelihoods and wellbeing extend through time. In some cases, and for some population groups, restoring economic resources, utilities and welfare services can take many years. Individual trauma and social disruption of course can last much longer. Recovery from disasters is an inherently prolonged and uneven process.

1 The ways in which disaster events are described influences ideas about what should be done in their aftermath

2 The ways in which people affected by disasters and their losses are portrayed influences the support they receive

3 Different priorities for post-disaster intervention emerge, reflecting different perspectives and interests

4 Approaches to how disaster events are memorialised also reflect different priorities and motivations

5 The media play a key role not just in circulating ideas about recovery, but in shaping and re-shaping them

6 Dominant ideas about what is needed may not always match the priorities of those most affected

7 Some social groups and their needs can be rendered almost invisible in post-disaster intervention

8 Yet there are means through which neglected groups can make their voices heard and their actions count

Yet, across the world, long-term recovery is typically a lower-priority aspect of disaster management policy and practice. Improvements in early warning systems, emergency preparedness plans and response protocols are seldom matched by coherent, multi-sectoral recovery plans and protocols. Where recovery is included in planning, it generally is limited to short-term reconstruction rather than long-term intervention. In its absence, it is perhaps inevitable that the political recovery 'space', the virtual arena in which priorities for recovery emerge and are promoted by different actors, becomes rife with different visions and motivations. The creation, circulation, reinforcement and subversion of such ideas is what we refer to here as the 'representation' of recovery. We argue that these representations play a crucial role in shaping what is done post-disaster, who benefits, and how.

In this document we present an argument for why the representations that are created around recovery can be so influential, and why understanding them is important if we are to strengthen recovery processes, especially for the most vulnerable and/or marginalised within society. We do so by drawing on a set of case studies from three states in India – Odisha, Tamil Nadu and Kerala – where we have undertaken research relating to disaster events that have occurred in recent memory. The three states are distinctive in their politics and social structure, and provide a flavour of the highly diverse national context that India presents. Nevertheless, experiences across the case studies reflect issues arising in disaster recovery processes across the globe.

The research, carried out primarily through the project 'Recovery with Dignity', funded by the British Academy, combined policy review and media analysis with interviews and participatory work in disaster-affected communities.

Here, we distil some of those findings into a progression of eight underlying points. We discuss each of these in the following pages, highlighted with examples from the case studies.

Representations of Events

Point 1: The ways in which disaster events are described influences ideas about what should be done in their aftermath

- Despite the now-widespread recognition that the effects of environmental hazards are fundamentally shaped by societal factors, and that no disaster is truly 'natural', it is still commonplace to hear disaster events described in terms of irresistible forces of nature about which little could have been done to reduce the risk.

- They are often portrayed in statements by politicians as shock events that could not have been foreseen or the impacts of which could not have been averted. Increasingly, such a narrative places blame on new uncertainties associated with climate change and, in doing so, sometimes eschews the historical record of hazards.

- This portrayal of events ignores the role of human agency and social structures in shaping who becomes exposed to hazards and who is affected most by them, both in the short and long term. It also creates an image of disaster in which responsibility for the event is diverted to nature and/or to the global processes that generate climate change.

- However, such portrayals do not go unchallenged and are now frequently met by counter-narratives, often conveyed through the media and through civic protest, that point to increasing scientific knowledge about hazards and place the blame on development issues and decision-making at a more local scale.

- These different narratives, in turn, affect how the responsibility to support people's recovery is construed, either as a form of redress for mistakes made by the powerful, or as a form of charity for misfortunes bestowed by fate. They also shape whether there is recognition of the gains that can be made in the post-disaster period to reduce future disaster risk and build resilience within society.

Below: Extreme rains triggered landslides and floods in Kerala in 2018 and 2019 but the disasters were not created by rainfall alone

Photo: Yashodara Udupa

Kerala: media portrayals of the August 2018 disaster

The heavy rains and floods that hit Kerala in August 2018 were repeatedly described in initial media reports as *'unprecedented'* in their magnitude and impact. The terrible loss of life exceeded previous recorded events, but floods of a similar magnitude occurred in 1924, and regular flood damage also occurred in the intervening years, including an extreme monsoon season in 1961 when a reported 115 lives were lost in floods and landslides. The singular descriptions of the 2018 disaster rang cruelly hollow after devastating floods and landslides returned in 2019. Adjectives commonly attached to the 2018 floods in reports and commentaries invoked anger or malevolent intent to nature, describing *'raging rivers'* and a *'monster flood'*, constructing a narrative around *'the tempestuous ferocity of nature, and the utter helplessness of humankind before that might'*.

However, contrasting characterisations soon began to emerge. A number of experts and commentators cited in newspaper articles represented the floods as the result of climate change, land degradation, the unmanaged development of waterways and other human activity in the Western Ghats that is exacerbating floods and landslide hazards. Others made contested claims that dam mismanagement, meteorological forecasting failures and ineffective early warning systems were at fault in turning these hazards into disaster events. Notably, there was much less critical discussion in the media about the socially-differentiated dimensions of vulnerability, such as poverty, marginalisation, livelihood type and other factors that tend to heighten people's exposure and susceptibility to hazard events.

Representations of People

Point 2: The ways in which people affected by disasters and their losses are portrayed influences the support they receive

- One often-repeated idea about disaster events is that they are great 'levellers', that everyone ends up 'in the same boat'. This is an extraordinarily misplaced conception. We know that vulnerability to disaster risk is hugely dependent on the access people have to resources that can help them avoid, pre-empt, resist and cope with the effects of hazards.

- We see such differential vulnerability play out even more starkly in the aftermath of a hazard when people affected take steps to rebuild their livelihoods and wellbeing. To put it simply, resources, options and opportunities for recovery vary hugely from person to person, from one social group to another, and from place to place. They vary according to patterns of wealth and savings, but also according to social status, political connections and the norms and disparities associated with gender, ethnicity, caste, disability and other dimensions of identity.

- While financial losses may be numerically greater for some, the focus on the absolute value of material losses does not reflect relative losses to households. It ignores non-material losses and masks how the pre-existence of assets normally means greater ability to 'bounce back'. Recognising this nuance is key if negative perceptions around continuing support to certain groups are to be avoided.

- In the immediate aftermath of events, it is common for media reports to focus on extremes of suffering and destitution. While there may be initial compassion at the heart of such depictions, over time this type of imagery can become normalised or, worse, lead to such people being perceived as dependent on relief, incapable of rebuilding their livelihoods, and over-reliant on 'handouts' from the state and from charities.

- Such a negative framing denies the huge, largely unacknowledged contributions that people themselves make to the physical, economic, social and psychosocial recovery of their households and communities. It denies their capacities and undermines their right to define the support that they themselves would wish to receive.

Below: Tarpaulins cover damaged homes in an informal settlement struck by Cyclone Fani, Odisha

Photo: Zohrab Reys Gamat

Odisha: Eligibility, need and exclusion in post-disaster housing

Successive disasters in Odisha have demonstrated the ways in which disaster-affected groups can be characterised, differentiated and, in some cases, excluded during post-disaster recovery processes such as housing reconstruction. Our research on post-disaster housing programmes following Cyclone Phailin in 2013 revealed 'beneficiary' identification processes that see people as 'worthy' or 'eligible' for receiving houses only if they meet certain conditions, the most prominent being land ownership. Those who do not qualify (though often the ones in greater need of assistance) rarely receive recovery support, often because the simple 'kutcha' hut homes that have been lost are built on land to which the occupants have no title.

Meanwhile, for those who do officially qualify for housing support, the tendency to homogenise people's needs and to render support to them as philanthropic can undermine recovery. Disaster-affected people tend to be offered 'one-size-fits-all' solutions, leaving many individuals, for example those with physical disabilities or special livelihood needs, worse-off than they were in their original homes. Irrespective of whether the new house is beneficial or not in terms of long-term socio-economic outcomes, people are seen as beneficiaries while the state positions itself as 'benevolent' and expects recipients not to question the suitability of the structure or location.

Representations of Priorities

Point 3: Different priorities for post-disaster intervention emerge, reflecting different perspectives and interests

- Just as in any sphere of governance, decisions about what to do following a disaster event are not straight-forward processes of identifying a problem and pursuing the most appropriate solution.

- The losses, damages and disruptions caused by a hazard may be obvious, but the manner of their replacement, repair and rehabilitation can take many pathways. Moreover, those paths are subject to differing ideas about financing and delivery, responsibility, the appropriate use of resources and what actions should be prioritised, as well as who should benefit from them.

- Different actors, from those directly affected by hazards to those reporting on their effects to those mandated to manage societal impacts, will have differing perspectives on the way forward. These viewpoints will inevitably be shaped by the actors' own interests and concerns. Some of these concerns may arise out of the disaster itself, but they may also reflect pre-existing agendas that take advantage of such times of urgency, and availability of funds.

- Post-disaster intervention is a crucible for intense debate about the past, present and future, one that extends over many months and years, and therefore one that is deeply politicised. Recovery inevitably plays out against the context of existing politics and the disaster event accentuates differences in who holds power, who lays claims and who shapes priorities.

- This interplay of interests can make the dialogue around post-disaster intervention increasingly abstract. It can lead to 'recovery' actions that bear little relation to the objective of addressing disaster-affected people's needs, particularly those of more marginalised social groups.

Below: Many poorer households were relocated to the outskirts of Chennai after the 2015 floods

Photo: Chandni Singh

Tamil Nadu: Resettlement priorities following floods in Chennai

In 2015, the city of Chennai was severely affected by flooding, following extreme rains that hit much of the state of Tamil Nadu. In the aftermath of the floods, the Chennai government came under considerable criticism, for mismanagement of an upstream reservoir, unchecked urbanisation, and poor attention to urban wetlands that could have buffered against flood risk. In response, the government was keen to demonstrate fast, decisive action, which was translated into rapid evacuation and resettlement of thousands of poorer households from areas in the centre of Chennai (e.g. along banks of the Cooum and Adyar rivers). The removal of these informal settlements was justified on the grounds that they were sites of 'encroachment' on flood-prone land. However, new business and infrastructure developments have since been built on much of the land they occupied.

Many of the former residents of these sites were relocated to new settlements in Perumbakkam on the outskirts of the city. Interviews with resettled households highlighted the new problems they face in trying to rebuild their lives and wellbeing in these locations. The livelihoods they had created were based on working in the centre of the city, and accessing those income opportunities has been made far more difficult by the cost of transportation. People also struggled with poor provision of services and safety concerns in these new locations. In effect, the post-disaster decisions made by the government created new vulnerabilities for groups already coping with losses arising from the floods. This rapid, reactive approach, driven by the urge to signal a dedicated state, shows how politicised priorities and interests can end up undermining the multi-faceted needs of disaster-affected people.

Forms of Memorialisation

Point 4: Approaches to how disaster events are memorialised also reflect different priorities and motivations

- Memorialisation of disasters takes many forms and serves varying functions. It can be intended primarily as commemoration, as a source of solace or repair, as a celebration of heroism and resilience, as a means of seeking support or redress, and/or as a means to teach future generations about risk.

- It might be assumed that the ways in which a disaster and its victims are remembered would be a collectively agreed and welcomed act of solidarity and support. Instead, processes of memorialisation, whether they take place in shared rituals, annual events, or in material structures, can be highly contentious.

- This is because they may rest on different ideas about what is appropriate, who it serves and what it signifies. Preferences about how to remember (or, indeed, how to forget or suppress memory) vary on a personal, emotional level. But they can also be subject to interests and motivations that extend beyond the losses of the event itself.

- In essence, because they can generate powerful symbols about society's failings but also about society's capacity to support one another, disaster memorialisations are inherently political. Their meanings may not be universally shared, and in some cases the meanings intended by the creators may be actively subverted by competing groups.

- Official versions of memorialisation such as the creation of monuments or the hosting of annual commemorative events are often shaped by a desire to strengthen or repair state-society relations, but they do not necessarily match the preferences expressed by disaster-affected communities.

- In many cases, disaster-affected people attach greater significance to more informal, symbolic reminders or personal rituals. This also underlines the importance of disaster-affected people's sense of ownership of the processes of memorialisation.

Below: Watching news clips from the Supercylone, a group of women in Odisha recounted their experiences to younger villagers

Photo: Zohrab Reys Gamat

Odisha: Shared meanings and memories of the Super-cyclone

Twenty years after the Super-cyclone that devastated parts of coastal Odisha in 1999, individuals and communities living in the most severely affected areas experience different ways of connecting with the event. Few people that we spoke to placed much emotional significance in the official Cyclone Memorial Day, organised annually by the local government as a public commemoration on October 29th – the day the storm made landfall. For some, greater importance was placed on more intimate story-telling settings, as a way to help better prepare younger generations for future incidences. We witnessed such story-telling in action in one of the worst-affected coastal villages. After the screening of a film about the Super-cyclone, a group of older women took the opportunity to explain to younger people who had shown little reaction to the footage about the trauma and suffering it had caused. It was a poignant moment initiated by those who had lived through the disaster and were seeking to keep their experiences alive across generations.

Sources of informal memorialisation were also embedded in the landscape. Survivors in one village described the persistence of symbolic representations of the disaster that constantly returned memories, positive ones in the shape of a house that withstood the waves and in which nobody died, and negative ones in the shape of another house still standing, but in which all but one person perished. In another place, a villager showed the researchers some coconut trees that had a pronounced kink in their growth, at the exact height, it was said, that the seawater reached during the storm surge.

Point 5: The media play a key role not just in circulating ideas about recovery, but in shaping and re-shaping them

- Print, broadcast and online media organisations play a key role in the communication of ideas about disaster and recovery within and between affected and non-affected populations. This was evident in the first example from the case studies, described under point 1. Its dominance may be under challenge with the rise of social media, but in most contexts the professional production of news content remains highly influential.

- Disasters are compelling news stories, especially in the early stages of impact, and, though accounts of recovery processes tend to gain steadily lessening coverage, their emotive, politicised and contested nature mean that at least some media interest continues. This ranges, for example, from human interest pieces celebrating individual stories of recovery to critical commentary on the progress of reconstruction.

- But the media does not only convey the ideas of others. In dispatching reporters to gather first-hand accounts, in selecting information sources, in collating the statements of politicians, commentators and government actors, and in producing editorial opinion pieces, often shaped by political allegiances, the media adds a further layer of perspective and subjectivity.

- Even when there is no overt editorialisation at work, the conventional practices of disaster reporting also shape how recovery needs are represented. There is a tendency when reporting to focus on visible impacts (in the form of damage to housing and infrastructure), to aggregate (for example in loss of lives or numbers of affected people) and to quantify (damage is often expressed in monetary terms). Such reporting tools homogenise impacts and tend to mask some of the more intangible effects of disasters.

- Media representations of disaster events, affected people, and support processes are therefore highly influential in setting the public agenda for recovery and reinforcing certain framings.

Below: Cyclone Gaja was relatively under-reported, despite the heavy damage it brought to parts of Tamil Nadu

Photo: Chandni Singh

Tamil Nadu: Rural-urban disparities in disaster reporting

Research on disaster situations in different sites within Tamil Nadu reveals major geographical disparities in the depth and content of media reporting. Disaster events and their aftermaths received uneven media coverage based on location. For example, reporting on the 2015 South India flood heavily focussed on Chennai city, the state capital and a centre for media organisations. By contrast, reporting on impacts in neighbouring rural districts was minimal, revealing an urban bias that was confirmed by interviews with journalists and humanitarian agencies.

Similarly, Cyclone Gaja, a 2018 disaster event that had a severe impact in the south of the state, several hours drive from Chennai, received little attention from national and state media despite its magnitude. On the one hand, this was said to be because storms on that stretch of coast are an established threat, and therefore perceived as less newsworthy than 'unprecedented' events such as the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami or the 2015 South India flood. On the other hand, interviewees explained that there was a lack of editorial interest to warrant investment of reporters' time in the field, developing the story. The reporting by external media that did take place tended to be based on brief visits to easily accessible locations, and had a largely congratulatory tone focussing on the number of deaths averted through effective evacuation and preparedness. Long-term impacts of Cyclone Gaja were not captured, largely because of news cycles and the urban bias in reporting. This uneven representation of events impacted on the external visibility of the disaster, and thereby seems to have affected the speed and quantity of relief aid and funding for recovery, as noted in several interviews.

Point 6: Dominant ideas about what is needed may not always match the priorities of those most affected

- As perspectives and approaches to recovery circulate within society, it is the norm for those expressed by the more powerful actors, with ready access to the media and with the networks and resources to exercise their influence among other stakeholders, to dominate the public discourse.

- Since recovery commonly requires major state intervention, it is the ideas of government agencies and their political superstructure that tend to become dominant – in the sense that it is these that are financed and acted on. But other agencies and key individuals within them, including aid organisations, non-governmental and private sector organisations, and, in some cases, religious organisations, can also become highly influential.

- As well as shaping the agenda of who benefits and how, these dominant representations of recovery can lead to specific sectoral foci for intervention. Because disaster impacts on society are so diverse, approaches to post-disaster intervention by governments ought to, and usually do, cross multiple sectors. Nevertheless, the weight of effort is commonly uneven and targeted to certain priorities. One tendency, for example, is to focus effort on housing and infrastructure reconstruction and on specific, high-productivity economic sectors.

- While undoubtedly crucial to recovery, the preoccupation with these sectors can lead to the side-lining of other aspects of recovery, especially non-material and unmeasured needs, for which the demand on the ground may be just as great. Key aspects of recovery such as recreating social networks and psychosocial support, rehabilitation of school and health centres, and restoration of water supplies, sanitation systems and green spaces tend to be overlooked.

- The situation that arises is frequently one of contested priorities, when the prevailing ideas of more influential actors and institutions do not always map closely on to the recovery ideas and aspirations of the most disaster-affected people.

Below: Recovery has many different aspects, beyond simply the repair of physical damages

Photo: Yashodara Udupa

Tamil Nadu: Narrow versus broad-based conceptions of recovery after the Tsunami

After the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, state and non-state organisations in Tamil Nadu focussed their activities most commonly on housing and infrastructure reconstruction and on rehabilitation of economic livelihoods. Communities in coastal areas that had been heavily impacted by the disaster, however, voiced to us a much broader understanding of recovery than that which was typically encapsulated within responses by government and civil society organisations. For example, the rebuilding of a community's social fabric and cohesiveness was considered important, as were measures that would help people to realise their longer-term hopes and aspirations for the future. Similarly, the importance of recognising and supporting people to adjust to a changed relationship with nature following the traumatic events was also seen as a vital, yet rarely addressed issue within recovery programmes.

Interviewees within disaster-affected communities rarely talked about recovery interventions, such as housing, in isolation. Instead, they emphasised all of the different elements of recovery and the quality of recovery interventions that needed to be in place to help the community as a whole move forward. This holistic understanding of recovery needs and provision at a community level contrasted with the more time-limited and programmatic approaches to recovery interventions that were implemented after the tsunami and after more recent disaster events.

Neglected Needs

Point 7: Some social groups and their needs can be rendered almost invisible in post-disaster intervention

- Amid the urgency and politics of post-disaster action, there is a high chance that the situations and needs of already-marginalised groups may draw even less attention than they normally receive.

- Groups such as the landless poor, certain castes, migrant workers in flood-prone coastal zones and scheduled tribes in landslide-prone uplands may have the least physical, social and cultural access to the media. They are also less likely to have channels of contact with support services and the institutions that manage external aid.

- In the process, their voices and concerns may simply be unheard by those making decisions about support and intervention. And even among population groups that do gain more attention, not everyone gains the same recognition. In many cases, gender disparities mean that the concerns of women are overlooked. What post-disaster support might reach marginalised social groups may therefore be out of tune with their needs, or even undermine their own attempts at recovery.

- At times, marginalised groups may even be by-passed entirely by priorities directed elsewhere. In the process, groups of people likely to have been deeply affected by disaster are, in effect, rendered invisible within the dominant discourses of recovery.

- In some cases, this neglect may be a deliberate political act of exclusion - one perhaps not feasible under normal circumstances but made possible by the disruption of norms following a major disaster.

Below: Many landless labourers who worked the paddyfields of Kerala faced severe livelihood impacts after the 2018 flood disaster

Photo: Yashodara Udupa

Kerala: Missing voices of the flood-hit landless labourers

Research after the 2018 floods within the Kuttanad region in Kerala reveal that the recovery needs of some social groups have been absent or neglected from the dominant narrative. In Kuttanad, owing to the predominance of paddy cultivation, the narrative of loss and recovery portrayed in the media and by the state largely revolved around paddy cultivators, overshadowing the losses incurred by other occupational groups, the most prominent among them being the landless agricultural labourers. These labourers largely belonged to historically marginalised Dalit communities and were concentrated in low-lying, less-accessible interior regions that were prone to flooding.

However, the vulnerabilities of landless agricultural labourers were multi-dimensional and not limited to physical exposure to the floods. Over the years, a steady reduction in the area under rice cultivation coupled with an increase in mechanisation of farm labour had resulted in a decline in the demand for labourers, reducing incomes and causing job losses. These chronic livelihood issues were interlaced with entrenched social inequality arising out of caste positions that constrained their ability to cope with and recover from the floods. Furthermore, the much acclaimed 'bumper harvest', which was represented as being synonymous with the recovery of the Kuttanad region, had little or no impact on the recovery of the landless agricultural labourers. Governmental narratives around the floods failed to adequately capture these social hierarchies within the paddy sector, and little attention was given to recognising and supporting different group's needs.

Self-Representation

Point 8: Yet there are means through which neglected groups can make their voices heard and their actions count

- External representations may be powerful, but marginalised groups' needs and voices are seldom completely suppressed. In most situations where a dominant representation of recovery needs is at odds with grassroots concerns, there are forms of resistance and opportunities to counter that framing.

- If they are not being served effectively through post-disaster intervention, people create the means to redefine their needs and articulate them through their own voices and actions. In so doing they self-organise to try to shape their own recovery trajectory.

- Disaster-affected people have a number of channels available through which to try to influence discussions, challenge priorities and express views of disaster impact, needs and capacities. They may do so through broadcast media such as community radio, by engaging in litigation, by appealing to local elected representatives or by more direct acts of protest. Those who have access to social media platforms have a ready means to exchange perspectives on recovery and build momentum for action.

- Localised social networks sometimes develop in response to disasters as a vehicle through which to press for recognition, support, recompense or grievance redressal. These may be ad hoc citizen's groups formed out of a shared concern as disaster-affected people, or they may draw on existing kinship, religious, occupational or political ties. However, it is important to note that, in doing so, they will often exclude the voices of other social groups.

- Increasingly, disaster-affected people are using creative means such as community theatre and painting murals in public spaces to raise awareness around their needs and to influence the opinions of others. Such forums are often organised with outside support, but they can provide an alternative, accessible channel for self-representation.

Below: Women's groups often play a key role in organising grassroots recovery initiatives in India

Photo: Zohrab Reys Gamat

Odisha: Encountering the state through a spectrum of responses, resistance, and self-organisation

Institutional recovery actions (and/or inactions) elicit a variety of responses from the disaster-affected communities that range from active opposition, fighting for rights, and voicing a demand, to filling the gaps by self-organizing. This became evident in Odisha where, after Cyclone Fani in 2019, many people were seen protesting on the streets against the 'unresponsiveness' of the state in restoring their drinking water supply, while other communities in a different region were seen protesting for more and better housing following post-disaster reconstruction interventions. Although fewer in number, some communities and individuals also took the litigation route to demand course correction from the state when they felt their priorities were excluded from decision-making processes, for example in decisions about the location of cyclone shelters. There were also instances recorded in our research in which people requested technical interventions, such as a sea-wall construction, not because it would address their priority needs, but because they knew that a state programme existed for such an investment and they felt this might be their only chance to draw some 'attention' from an otherwise 'inactive' state.

There are also other mediated artistic platforms, such as community radio stations and independent theatre groups like Natya Chetna, that offer people an outlet to voice their experiences, and a way to help cope with mental trauma – an aspect that receives limited attention from mainstream recovery actors. Meanwhile, in a fishing village in Odisha, women self-organised to pool money towards a 'resilience fund' that could help them recover from future crisis conditions, having learned a lesson after the recent cyclone when they felt their needs were disregarded.

Above: Fishing communities in many parts of India are managing the long-term consequences of disasters

Photo: Yashodara Udupa

Conclusion

Through the progressive sequence of points made above we seek to show how the ways in which disaster events, the people affected and the priorities for intervention are conceived, portrayed and discussed within society come together to create competing sets of ideas of what should be done, by who and for whom in the long-term post-disaster period. Seldom do we see an impartial process of rehabilitation in which relative needs are assessed and prioritised, from which holistic lessons carefully drawn through which to reduce future disaster impacts. Instead, we see the entry of competing viewpoints and interests into a representational arena, in which ideas are commonly partial, overtly politicised and contested. Because they shape the options and support available to disaster-affected people, representations of recovery can have profound effects on people's chances to restore their livelihoods and wellbeing, particularly on those for whom poverty and marginalisation make the process of recovery an especially prolonged struggle.

Part of the reason why the foment of ideas that emerges post-disaster takes on such importance, we suggest, is that recovery itself is a strategically weak component within the institutional fabric of disaster risk management in most countries. Though widely recognised as a key aspect of disaster risk reduction, relatively little attention is given in advance of events to formulating plans and developing best practice for long-term recovery. Instead, responsibility for the management of the long-term consequences of disasters tends to fall between the cracks, under no particular jurisdiction and diffused across sectoral government departments. Moreover, although there is a recognized imperative to 'build back better', there

remains little meaningful engagement in recovery practices with addressing the underlying societal drivers of risk that generate and reproduce differential vulnerability.

Managing disaster recovery is a hugely challenging task. However, it is not well served if the ways in which impacts and recovery needs are articulated lead to the effective exclusion of certain sectors, social groups, needs and concerns from full consideration, or to the blocking of alternative perspectives such as proactive approaches to future risk reduction. Key in this is the need to shift representations of recovery to better match the needs and voices of those most affected. In our interviews with disaster-affected people in India, we learnt about what they feel worked well and did not, about how to avoid future disasters and about their desire to have an active voice in shaping the factors that influence risk. Additionally, we also learnt how people can and do try to shift representations of their needs and rights, through creative arts and local media access, as well as through advocacy, litigation and protest. Enabling those voices to be exercised and respected is one way to help bring about more equitable and sustainable disaster recovery.

Disasters themselves can create windows for change, times of upheaval in which the social and political conditions that emerge open opportunities for groups to challenge and transform structures, policies and practices. However, they can also have the opposite effect, forcing an even greater closing down of options. Pre-establishing inclusive, broad-based mechanisms for recovery management may be one way to prevent this reactive tendency and prevent the needs of marginalised groups being side-lined. We argue that recovery intervention should take a long-term, area-based approach instead of the current project-based approach, to enable sustained engagement with vulnerable communities and address their multi-dimensional needs. This includes disaster management organisations doing advance preparatory work in areas that are at risk of hazards and working hard to bring more marginalised groups into a pre-planning process. However, this does not mean that a 'recovery package' should be neatly presented and frozen in time, and reeled out automatically to deal with every subsequent disaster. Plans should be adapted to new circumstances and open to the voices of those affected to find out what is working and what is not, through promoting, for example, multi-level grievance redressal mechanisms. And this has to continue long after the disaster event, because many impacts take time to truly surface.

Above: Fishing boats at Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu

Photo: Roger Few

Acknowledgements

Further reading

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