

# Reconsidering the Challenge of Theorizing Relief, Reconstruction and Resilience

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# How shall we conceive the Problem?

## Analytic Premise

Efforts to secure humanitarian relief and reconstruction and mitigate future losses from disasters occur in enormously complex socio-political and economic environments.

## Ways to consider:

- in terms of analytic scale  
strategic  
operating
- in light of manifest and overlapping imperatives  
relief  
reconstruction  
community resilience.

Once these are identified, we can consider  
theoretic tools ...

... to describe their dynamics

... to inform well-intentioned leaders  
and actors

## **Considering Strategic Factors and Conditions Shaping the Context for Relief, Reconstruction and Resilience**

- Immediate and compelling human needs
- A multitude of actors with varying capacities, incentives and interest in responding to disaster, including:
  - Affected national and local governments
  - International organizations
  - International nongovernmental organizations
  - Nongovernmental organizations
- Media defines and characterizes responses at local, national and international scales

- Skeptical donors and mass audiences asserting strong accountability claims.
- No single authoritative actor in charge of disaster-related activities

But, some organization actors and initiatives are encouraging shared response.

Some actors are actively encouraging learning within and among engaged organizations.

- Needs are generally multisectoral ranging from infrastructure to utilities, food, shelter, health care and education
- Needs require response by multiple actors in different sectors

Effective first responses to disasters must be local and, ultimately, all responses must be multisectoral to succeed.

A key overall imperative for all wishing to provide aid is to work with local capacities rather supplant or replace them.

## **Operating Factors/ and Conditions shaping Context for Relief**

- Prior organization of resources and adequate training of would-be intervenors/responders
- Appropriate logistics and supply chain management
- Adequate funding for all actors
- Careful assessment of needs including active consultation with those affected
- Adequate coordination and communication among all actors providing assistance



## **Operating Factors/Conditions Shaping Reconstruction**

- Local needs assessment and development of partnerships among relevant actors to craft and implement strategies
- Broad dialogue among those affected concerning risks associated with living patterns before the disaster event
- Appropriate technologies and policies for (re)development built upon culturally sensitive public dialogue
- Due consideration of alternatives to existing infrastructure and living patterns prior to their reconstruction or replacement

## **Operating Factors/Conditions Shaping Resilience**

- Assessment of local capacities for response to emergency needs
- Opportunities for community-based dialogue on weighting risks in light of living habits and settlement patterns
- Negotiated plans for cooperation among actors in different sectors
- Attention to the social capital and trust levels evident in communities confronting relatively high levels of risk

# How shall we theorize this domain?

These conditions and imperatives involve multiple actors with alternate incentives for engagement and differing missions.

They are ensconced in networks, but networks in which the players and stakeholders are not necessarily aware of the needs of the others

Exogenous factors and judgments may shape potentials for effective action at any stage:

- whether international donors respond and how
- how “aid” itself is conceived
- how its receipt is regarded and treated
- what the media choose to emphasize and adopt as overall narrative

No single actor exerts authoritative control over the domain.

Charting the contexts that describe the interaction of strategic claims and imperatives that mediate across sectors and domains of action to develop meta-level theory.

Dynamic, often inchoate and evolving networks that are

- Potentially polycentric,
- Whose member donor and implementing organizations employ sensemaking to map their contexts and determine their actions
- Whose members collectively grapple with an array of challenges:

Assuring ways and means to involve those most affected in all critical choices

Developing and institutionalizing mechanisms to secure, and means to share, aspirational purposes and experiential learning

Developing shared normative and descriptive yardsticks to define success in relief, reconstruction and resilience

## A contextualized theoretic approach:

- Aimed at describing networks engaged in relevant stages of disaster-related engagement,
- Contingent on how salient strategic factors shape possibilities,
- Mediated by how organizational actors conceive of their roles and responsibilities.



## **A multi-sectoral collaborative adaptive network?**

More understanding needs to be obtained on:

- Building and understanding community engagement,
- Community imaginaries,
- Helping communities self-consciously explore these.

An analytic taxonomy of the sort described here, highlighting the strategic context as it shapes operating activities and challenges at the meta-level in each of the stages of disaster planning and response, may be a useful tool to consider the challenge afresh.