

Overview of key findings

Natural disasters (e.g. earthquakes and floods) and man-made disasters (e.g. armed conflict) can have devastating effects on societies – physically, economically, socially and culturally. Post-disaster rehabilitation and reconstruction require careful assessment and planning. They also require the involvement of local communities, in order to develop appropriate design and implementation of disaster rehabilitation and reconstruction programmes. This brief overview pulls together the key findings from a series of recent GSDRC helpdesk research reports on the social and cultural aspects of disaster recovery.

Assessments have commonly focused on damage to physical infrastructure. However, this is insufficient as it fails to address local social, economic, cultural and ecological factors. Disasters can destroy not only physical infrastructure and physical cultural heritage, but also intangible cultural heritage (e.g. building typologies and skills, handicraft traditions, communal livelihoods and traditions, social relationships and ecological balances). Assessments should consider how disaster and disaster recovery interventions impact upon traditional livelihoods, community identity, social relationships and relationships with the environment. Assessments should also consider the particular needs of the affected communities, local vulnerabilities, the differing impact that disaster can have on social groups, and the existence of local capacities and adaptation mechanisms.

In the absence of proper assessment and planning, rehabilitation and reconstruction interventions can be inappropriate and disconnected from communities. At worst, they can produce further harm. International donors, for example, have often refused to support the repair and reconstruction of traditional vernacular housing in disaster-affected societies, in favour of generic and standardised housing. This has resulted in the disappearance of not only built cultural heritage but also traditional building skills and a 'way of life'.

The participation of local communities in disaster rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts can minimize such harms. Their participation is important in itself as it allows members of affected populations to emerge as social actors. It is also advantageous as local involvement can result in more appropriate assessments; quick responses on the ground; more effective programme design and implementation; greater ownership and sustainability; and increased accountability. To date, however, grassroots participation in crisis and disaster recovery has been insignificant. In order to facilitate greater community engagement, local populations must be provided with timely and regular access to information. In addition, donors and other interveners must recognise and draw upon the knowledge and capacity of local community organisations and on local coping, adaptation and recovery mechanisms.

For a summary of some of the best literature available on these issues, see the following GSDRC helpdesk reports:

- [Social Assessment of Disaster Reconstruction Activities](#)
- [Community Participation in Disaster Rehabilitation and Recovery](#)
- [Intangible Heritage and Post-Disaster Protection](#)

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