

Build back better principles for economic recovery: Case study of the Victorian bushfires

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at developing build back better (BBB) principles for economic recovery using the 2009 Victorian bushfires in Australia as a case study. The concept behind BBB-based economic recovery is to rejuvenate the economy in

disaster-affected communities along with rebuilding to create resilient sustainable communities. A review of the literature identified several principles that can be applied to economic recovery to build back better. Data were collected in 2010 and 2011 by conducting semi-structured interviews with stakeholders who were directly involved in the Victorian bushfires recovery efforts, along with reports and other documentation. The recovery in Victoria displayed the use of BBB-based initiatives for economic recovery. The successes and shortcomings contributed to the creation of a modified list of BBB principles for economic recovery, including: creating an economic strategy based on thorough data collection; providing effective funding through grants and flexible low-interest loans; establishing business advice and mentoring services; providing incentives for businesses; assisting speedy rebuilding of business buildings; providing subsidised employee training and up-skilling programmes; and promoting local businesses through advertising.

Keywords: *build back better, economic recovery, Victorian bushfires, business, community*

INTRODUCTION

The Victorian bushfires disaster, also referred to as 'Black Saturday', took place

on 7th February 2009. It was the worst bushfire event in the history of Australia; 173 lives were lost, 430,000 hectares of land destroyed and 78 communities affected. The bushfires in Victoria had a large economic impact on the affected areas, which were mountainous high country lands, forests and pastures, where the key industries were agriculture, forestry and tourism. The fires caused damage to 2,000 properties, 55 businesses and 3,550 agricultural facilities.¹

The Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority (VBRRA) was created several days after the fires to coordinate and oversee the recovery process. VBRRA established a recovery framework that identified the local community, safety, health and well-being of the people, reconstruction, economy and the environment as the key areas of focus.¹

This paper explains the concept 'build back better' (BBB) in the context of post-disaster recovery and looks at how principles developed on the basis of BBB can be used to enhance post-disaster economic recovery of affected communities. BBB principles identified in international literature are presented along with data collected on the post-disaster recovery following the 2009 Victorian bushfires in Australia. The bushfires case study is used to evaluate the initiatives put in place for economic recovery in Australia, whether BBB concepts were incorporated and the implications of their recovery decisions over time. The successes and challenges faced in Victoria are reviewed and used to compile a set of BBB principles to assist future post-disaster economic recovery practices.

ECONOMIC CONDITIONS IN POST-DISASTER ENVIRONMENTS

Disasters cause damage to the economy of communities with the disruption of busi-

nesses and income-generating industries, leading to issues such as high inflation rates and poverty. The adverse effects of disasters on the economy can also impede the overall recovery of a city. Hurricane Katrina shows a disaster's long-term impacts on higher education and health care in New Orleans, which were the foundations of the city's economy, eventually leading to a decline in population numbers as people moved away in search of better opportunities.²

Post-disaster recovery efforts to date have shown support for economic recovery with strategies such as 'cash-for-work' programmes, provision of business grants, 'asset replacement' programmes to provide industries with necessary resources and training programmes to up-skill locals and help them find work.³⁻⁵ In Aceh, Indonesia, tsunami-affected people were trained and employed in reconstruction to provide them with a source of income alongside the opportunity to become involved in their own recovery.⁶ In Japan following the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, the Government decided to consolidate smaller fishing markets into large fishing centres to enable fishermen to support each other.⁷ The Christchurch City Council's Central City Plan proposes fast-tracking of building consents for businesses to allow faster repair and construction work.⁸

Despite the implementation of such initiatives as those mentioned above, post-disaster economic recovery is reportedly slow and below pre-disaster levels.^{2, 9,10} The lack of success in economic recovery initiatives can be attributed to insufficient backing from policies and legislation for employment creation and lack of consideration given to the needs of affected communities.¹¹ Kennedy *et al.*,⁶ Pathiraja and Tombesi¹² and Potangaroa¹³ described cases where relocation of coastal communities for risk

reduction following the Indian Ocean and Samoan tsunamis resulted in the loss of traditional livelihoods such as fishing and tourism. Grant and loan schemes introduced for businesses usually come with limitations that are not attractive enough for business owners.^{14,15} Lyons,¹⁶ Khasalamwa¹⁷ and Birkmann and Fernando¹⁸ observed inequities in the provision of financial and material aid to different community groups as a result of influence and politics in Sri Lanka. Silva³ stated that the 'politically powerful groups harnessed advantages of the aid programmes' and that 'disadvantaged people have been further fragmented and marginalized'. Florian¹⁹ reported that, in Indonesia, sectoral livelihood recovery programmes led to parts of the community being overlooked showing how poor coordination and coverage of livelihood programmes inhibit recovery.

WHAT IS 'BBB'?

BBB is a concept that was introduced to improve post-disaster reconstruction and recovery. BBB was officially established following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami disaster, which affected 14 countries on an unprecedented scale. BBB entails using reconstruction not only to rebuild damaged structures and infrastructure, but also encourage a holistic approach towards improving physical, psycho-social and economic conditions of affected communities to improve overall resilience.^{17,20,21}

BBB-BASED ECONOMIC RECOVERY

The former US president Bill Clinton published guidelines containing ten propositions to guide BBB-based recovery: 'Key Propositions for Building Back Better'.²⁰ The guidelines stress that: 'a sustainable recovery process depends on

reviving and expanding private economic activity and employment and securing diverse livelihood opportunities for affected populations'. Thus, the uniqueness of BBB comes from the integrated approach it proposes by giving economic recovery as much importance as reconstruction and aiming to provide solutions to suit local dynamics and preferences.^{17,20,22,23}

Lessons learnt from post-disaster experiences worldwide have provided recommendations that form a list of principles for economic recovery leading to BBB:

- The first step is to obtain accurate information about the local population through data collection and consultation with local governmental authorities.
- A comprehensive economic recovery strategy must be created that is to be tailor-made to suit each different community based on data obtained.
- Where applicable, attractive and flexible low-interest loan packages must be provided.
- Where applicable, business grants and resources to support livelihoods must be provided.
- People should be encouraged to engage in low-skill reconstruction activities.
- Diverse and sustainable sources of income must be introduced to communities if they are unable to continue with their previous livelihoods.
- New livelihood options introduced must be based on locally available skills and resources and sustainable long term.
- Training programmes must be held to support people in improving their existing livelihoods or acquiring new skills.
- Mechanisms must be put in place to monitor and support ongoing livelihood activities to maintain and strengthen economic recovery.

Table 1: Profiles of the interviewees in Australia

<i>Research trip</i>	<i>Interviewee code</i>	<i>Number of interviewees</i>	<i>Description</i>
Research trip 1 July 2010	P1–P9	9	Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority
	P10 & P11	2	Building Commission
	P12	1	Temporary village
	P13	1	Local council
	P14 & P15	2	Volume builders
	P16 & P17	2	Department of Human Services (DHS)
Research trip 2 July 2011	P18	1	Fire Recovery Unit (FRU)
	P19	1	Building Commission
	P20	1	Office of Housing, DHS
	P21	1	Department of Planning and Community Development
	P22	1	Economic Recovery, FRU
	P23	1	FRU
	P24	1	Marysville Community Recovery Committee
	P25	1	Marysville Chamber of Commerce

VICTORIAN BUSHFIRES DATA COLLECTION

Qualitative data were collected by visiting the affected areas in Victoria in 2010 and 2011. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with stakeholders who were directly involved in the recovery operations and from reports and other documents published about the disasters, with more focus on Marysville, one of the worst bushfire-affected towns in Victoria. Interviewee details are presented in Table 1. Participants were asked to comment on the implementation, implications, challenges and recommendations of socio-economic recovery activities in the post-disaster practices.

The stakeholders interviewed included officials from the recovery authority established to oversee recovery and reconstruction activities, including rebuilding, psycho-social recovery and economic recovery [VBRRA and Fire Recovery Unit (FRU)], government officials in charge of community recovery (DHS), officials involved with structural regulation changes (Building Commission), rebuild-

ing advisers, who helped the community with rebuilding (VBRRA and FRU), builders, local council who provided the local council perspective, town planners who were developing the new urban plans (VBRRA) and representatives from local community organisations who were involved in grass-roots level activities, such as community consultations and economic recovery [Marysville Community Recovery Committee (CRC), Marysville Chamber of Commerce].

POST-DISASTER ECONOMIC RECOVERY IN VICTORIA

The economic impact of the bushfires in Victoria was great, with interviewee P1 from VBRRA commenting that building the economy back up would be a difficult task: 'the economic team would have the roughest job of all'. Various types of support were provided to restore businesses and re-establish people's disrupted livelihoods. In spite of the support provided for businesses, the locals displayed some hesitancy in taking up the services provided.

The prominent factors that shaped the resulting economic recovery can be categorised under business-owner decisions, rebuilding businesses, resource and skills shortages and economic recovery strategy.

Business-owner decisions

Business owners in the affected towns had a difficult time making decisions regarding the future of their businesses. Interviewee P10 explained that the bushfires had resulted in a considerable evacuation of the towns and business owners were hesitant to re-establish themselves in a place with no residents to use their services. In turn, home owners were hesitant to settle in a community with no shops, which resulted in a 'deadlock' situation. Interviewee P25 added: 'There was no one unlocking the deadlock. If I'm a business owner I wouldn't go and invest AUS\$50–200,000 for a business to restart if I've got no one living here'.

Interviewee P25, who had made the decision to purchase and operate a business in Marysville, spoke about the difficulty some people were having on making decisions about their future because of emotional reasons. He added that the opening of some businesses encouraged others to follow: 'When the supermarket opened ten months after the fires, shortly afterwards the petrol station opened, then the café, then the school, a takeaway shop etc. All little increments of improvements and changes built more confidence'.

Rebuilding businesses

The physical rebuilding of places from which businesses can operate was an important factor for economic recovery. Interviewee P1 felt that more support could have been given to help businesses rebuild: 'Businesses could have been allowed to rebuild with fast-tracked permit procedures'. There was also a shortage of skilled builders due to the high workloads

in other areas and the remoteness of the bushfire-affected locations, which slowed down the rebuild. Interviewee P20 recommended that the rebuilding industry and commercial industries such as hotels and motels could support each other and provide subsidised accommodation to attract trades to rebuilding work.

Resource and skills shortages

Interviewee P19 commented that the sudden rise in construction activities also impacted on the economy: 'The sudden demand for building work after the bushfires drove prices up. Since there was a lot of work and not enough contractors, the contractors put their prices up'. Interviewee P18 said that resource shortages and price rises are inevitable in post-disaster environments as it is a matter of 'supply and demand'. Resources and skills shortages impact on the economic recovery of businesses, driving up costs of replacing infrastructure.

Interviewee P22 said that a shortage of suitable staff for other types of employment in the affected towns impacted on economic recovery and that subsidised training programmes have been set up as a counter-measure.

Economic recovery strategy

Grants and funds were provided for immediate restoration and loans of up to AUS\$200,000 at concessional interest rates.¹ A Business Information and Support service along with a Small Business Mentoring service was also set up with free professional advice and counselling for business owners.²⁴ A temporary retail centre was established in Marysville to provide temporary retail spaces while permanent locations were being rebuilt.²⁴ Interviewee P22 explained that the retail spaces were provided for a heavily subsidised rent. Marysville resident interviewee P25 shared that: 'the Government was

very good in getting everything to happen'. A Back to Work programme was also launched to help people to return to work with assistance provided on writing resumes, job seeking, interview preparation and accessing skills training.^{4,24}

The FRU official from the Economic Recovery team said that new economic strategies were being introduced in 2011 based on observations in the previous years.²⁵⁻²⁷ A large conference centre project was being introduced in Marysville for tourism while also attracting other businesses such as retail shops, gift shops and accommodation. More flexible low-interest loan packages were also introduced replacing stricter loans. The new loan package provided a concessionary loan with 50 per cent subsidy on the interest rate for five years. Interviewees P16 and P10 pointed out that a significant proportion of Marysville's income was from rental and accommodation businesses, which were not sufficiently supported during the rebuild. Marysville resident interviewee P12 said: 'Less than 10 per cent of the bed and breakfasts have been rebuilt. Most rental property owners have also given up, which is a significant concern for the town'. Interviewee P22 said that the new flexible loan package introduced in 2011 would also benefit the rental industry, encouraging business owners to build new rental properties. Interviewee P22 explained that merging two distinct business recovery groups that had formed in Marysville was another approach taken to support economic recovery.

From a government perspective, interviewee P22 said that there was some indecision with regard to how business rejuvenation was approached:

'There was a question of who's going to make the first move. Do you get the smaller businesses in and that'll attract a

bigger one? Or are people waiting for a bigger one to come in before they make their decision?'

Although interviewee P23 said that the government support being provided was directing people back to the normal pre-disaster streams of support, the closure of VBRRA caused some concern. Interviewee P24 from the Marysville CRC said: 'I would've liked to see VBRRA go on for probably another six months. It would've helped to finish off a lot of the things that are going on'.

ANALYSIS OF POST-BUSHFIRE ECONOMIC RECOVERY IN VICTORIA

A range of support programmes for economic recovery was displayed in Victoria in line with some of the BBB principles identified from literature such as providing funds, assistance and advice to businesses along with several other initiatives put in place by VBRRA. The Business Information Support and Small Business Mentoring services were helpful in assisting business owners to make decisions and directing them to necessary sources of support. The temporary retail centres enabled businesses to start up sooner than anticipated. The opening of the Marysville supermarket within one year of the bushfires was a significant achievement for the economic recovery of the town, which triggered other business to open.

The economic recovery programmes could have been more successful in terms of BBB with greater consideration given to the needs of the community. The resident versus business deadlock and the long time taken by business owners to make decisions about the future became prominent issues impacting the recovery of towns. It is not economical for business owners to set up in a town with a low

number of residents; while, at the same time, people are hesitant to live in a town that does not offer viable livelihood and business opportunities and facilities. Following a disaster, people are always left with the indecision whether to move away or remain. Advice and support must be provided to guide decision making, along with incentives to influence residents and businesses.

Delays in permit procedures, which prevented business owners from rebuilding their business buildings in a timely manner, were discouraging. The inability of business owners to establish themselves in permanent locations in a reasonable period of time can compel businesses to relocate to towns that offer more security and stability. Supporting the rebuilding of businesses must therefore be an important component of economic recovery strategies. Special facilitations in permit procedures for businesses and providing incentives to attract builders for reconstruction work are ways that business rebuilding can be assisted. The construction industry boomed following the fires, but the shortage of builders and trades drove prices up, which was problematic for the community. As controlling the price rise following a disaster is difficult, government support is necessary through grants and better insurance options.

The observations of slow economic recovery in the first two years after the fires led recovery authorities VBRRA and FRU to release revised economic recovery strategies in 2011 with flexible loan schemes, more support for the rental industry in Marysville and the proposal of the Marysville conference centre. Introducing a big business like a conference centre can help to boost the economy by creating new jobs and attracting new businesses, residents and tourists. The subsidised training programmes introduced in response to the recognised skills

shortages enable the up-skilling of community members and improve their chances of finding employment. Co-locating the Business Chamber of Commerce and Tourism Chamber in Marysville enabled businesses to support each other and work together to revive the town's economy.

The experiences from the Victorian bushfire recovery effort have shown the need for a tailor-made economic strategy targeting the specific needs of different communities. For example, Marysville's recovery may have been improved with better understanding of the importance of the rental and B&B industries to its overall recovery and delivering more support to revive them.

Economic recovery is a long-term process and residents of affected towns preferred extended support from VBRRA. Prolonged reliance on external organisations such as VBRRA and FRU is not favourable for the recovery of communities that need to re-establish their livelihoods. The responsibility for economic recovery support should be handed over to local councils to monitor and continue in the long term, with wider government support when necessary.

PROPOSED BBB PRINCIPLES FOR POST-DISASTER ECONOMIC RECOVERY

Successful economic recovery requires strong commitment from the government. Recommendations from international post-disaster experiences and the findings from the Victorian bushfires case study presented in this paper have been compiled to create a set of universally applicable BBB principles for post-disaster economic recovery that can assist government operations:

- *Creation of a tailor-made recovery strategy:*

Recovery should be tailor-made to suit each different community. Data must be collected, such as people's livelihoods, skills, income levels and preferences. Post-disaster practices can be made more efficient by collating these data in the pre-disaster stage. Local councils are in the best position to carry this out.

- *Provision of effective funding:* The government should provide grants and flexible low-interest loan schemes to attract businesses.
- *Provision of advice and support for decision making:* Business support and counselling services should be provided to assist with the economic recovery.
- *Incentives for businesses:* 'Resident versus business' deadlocks should be identified as a real issue and dealt with by supporting businesses and attracting residents to remain. Providing information, regular updates and promoting community cohesion can influence residents to stay. Providing temporary retail spaces for businesses to start up early will encourage other businesses. Introducing a big business, such as a conference centre, sports stadium or shopping mall, will help to boost the economy by creating new jobs and attracting new businesses as well as residents and tourists.
- *Support for rebuilding businesses:* Rebuilding of businesses must be facilitated through special fast-tracked permit procedures. Incentives such as subsidised accommodation must be provided to attract builders from other areas to participate in rebuilding.
- *Provision of training and up-skilling programmes:* Training programmes must be held to up-skill community members based on skills shortages and introduce more livelihood opportunities.
- *Promotion of local businesses:* Persistent advertising needs to be done to promote the industries and encourage people to return or relocate.

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