IMPLEMENTATION OF BUILD BACK BETTER IN VICTORIAN BUSHFIRE RECONSTRUCTION AND LESSONS LEARNT FOR NEW ZEALAND

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INTRODUCTION

The State of Victoria, Australia was devastated on Black Saturday, 7th February 2009 with the worst bushfires in the country’s history sweeping through 78 communities where 173 lives were lost and more than 430,000 hectares of land was destroyed [11]. The Australian Government and Local Authorities were faced with a large scale rebuilding and recovery task to reconstruct the built environment and re-establish people’s livelihoods. This paper focuses on the theme of “Building Back Better” in post-disaster reconstruction; how Build Back Better (BBB) was applied to the recovery in Victoria; and lessons-learnt for implementation in the Christchurch, New Zealand recovery effort.

BUILD BACK BETTER

The term “Build Back Better” (BBB) started to emerge in post-disaster reconstruction environments following the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004 [3, 5] with the idea that the reconstruction process should be utilized to improve a community’s physical, social, environmental and economic conditions after a disaster and create a new resilient state of ‘normalcy’ [7, 10].

Key BBB concepts extracted from guidelines such as “Key Propositions for Building Back Better” by former United States President Bill Clinton [3], “Principles for settlement and shelter” by United Nations Disaster Relief Organization [3, 6] and “Build Back Better Guiding Principles” established in Sri Lanka during Post-Tsunami reconstruction [7] can be grouped into three main categories: Risk Reduction, Community Recovery and Implementation. Risk Reduction addresses improving a community’s physical resilience to natural hazards, while Community Recovery indicates improving the social and economic conditions of the community. Implementation collates the means by which Risk Reduction and Community Recovery should take place in an efficient and effective manner.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Two research trips were made to Melbourne and bushfire affected areas surrounding Melbourne such as Marysville, Kinglake, and Alexandra in July 2010 and July 2011. Data was obtained from interviewing a range of stakeholders involved in the Victorian Bushfires reconstruction and recovery activities, reports and publications regarding bushfire recovery activities and observations made during the visits. An inductive approach using Grounded Theory and Constant Comparative Method [4, 8, 9] was used to analyze the data using the computer programme NVivo 9.

APPLICATION OF BBB IN VICTORIAN BUSHFIRE RECOVERY

RISK REDUCTION

The revision of the Australian Building Code AS3959 to provide better protection from flammability and strict hazard-based land zoning were the key risk reduction measures taken in Victoria. The builders interviewed said that the building code improvements weren’t difficult to implement in low to medium risk zones and were accepted by the community. Construction in high risk zones was however problematic as it required specialized materials which were difficult to source and thus caused delays and increased cost.

COMMUNITY RECOVERY

Information centres called Community Hubs were created and Case Managers were assigned to each affected family to direct them to necessary information and resources. Locals found the Case Manager Service a “great help” despite some issues raised about incompatibility with locals and their service periods being too short. The social events held in Victoria after the bushfires such as the first year anniversary memorial service and the temporary villages created helped the locals to come together and re-establish community cohesion which aids psychological recovery [1, 2].

The rebuilding effort was used to address town-planning issues and improve functionality for residents and tourists. The economic recovery of the affected towns was deemed unsatisfactory despite the Government support provided. The interviewees claimed that the unsuccessfulness of economic recovery activities had a negative impact on overall recovery which dissuaded people from returning to settle down.
IMPLEMENTATION

The Australian Government created The Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority (VBRRA) to oversee the reconstruction and recovery process [11]. Interviewees shared that coordination of stakeholders was difficult to achieve even with VBRRA's governance resulting in a chaotic, ad-hoc, inefficient environment. Despite permit facilitations made to support reconstruction there were delays due to Local Councils not having the capacity to keep up with demands. There has been a high degree of community consultation regarding recovery activities but people were suffering from trauma and were slow at decision-making. Interviewees from VBRRA said that the lack of specific pre-planned processes to guide the recovery activities was a setback. The failure to learn from the 2003 Canberra Bushfires and make recovery plans which would have benefited the Victorian Bushfires recovery effort was considered a missed opportunity.

CONCLUSIONS: LESSONS LEARNT FOR THE CHRISTCHURCH RECONSTRUCTION AND RECOVERY EFFORT

RISK REDUCTION

The integration of land-use planning and building controls for risk reduction is essential. Costly time-consuming design and construction requirements should be avoided by preventing construction in high-risk areas by using techniques such as land-swapping and insurance schemes.

COMMUNITY RECOVERY

An arrangement such as the Case Manager Service using Case Managers who are trained and familiar with local communities should be adopted. Organizing social, cultural and religious gatherings to bring affected locals together must be included as an important component of community recovery initiatives. The Government should encourage pre-existing and potential new businesses to set themselves up in Christchurch by using incentive schemes. Shop spaces could be provided for subsidized rent and the introduction of large projects like a mall or sports stadium would attract a range of small businesses. Advertising campaigns should also be utilized to attract residents and tourists back into the area.

IMPLEMENTATION

To ensure BBB takes place as intended, coordination and clear role allocation by The Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority (CERA) is necessary along with stakeholder transparency. Local Councils are responsible for communities in the long-term therefore need to be included in recovery activities from the beginning and supported by recruiting help from other councils and other organizations. Having legislations and regulations to incorporate risk reduction measures and facilitate lengthy permit procedures is required. Due to the slow decision-making capacity of people after a disaster, information obtained from community consultations need to be evaluated after which final decisions should be made by the local and national Governments based on available resources and the best interest of the community. Lessons learnt from this experience should be fed into preparing Recovery Plans for future disasters.

REFERENCES