

Thesis Title: Community Participation in Post Disaster Reconstruction and Rehabilitation: Case Studies in Japan and Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Community participation is critical to the “Build Back Better” (BBB) framework in post-disaster reconstruction, as it ensures that recovery efforts are more responsive to local needs and more sustainable and resilient. BBB emphasizes the importance of incorporating community input to enhance the effectiveness and longevity of reconstruction projects. The imperative for disaster-affected communities to actively participate in post-disaster reconstruction is underscored by extensive academic and policy discourse. Despite the broad consensus on its critical importance, there remains a striking gap between the theoretical advocacy for community involvement and its practical realization; thus, in many cases, communities are still being excluded in the reconstruction process, leading to not-so-successful reconstruction and non-ownership of reconstruction projects by their respective recipients.

This doctoral thesis bridges this gap by critically examining community perspectives on participation in post-disaster recovery and reconstruction, specifically focusing on the Build Back Better (BBB) initiative. Through case studies from Kamaishi Unosumai, Japan, and Tsholotsho District, Zimbabwe—following the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and Cyclone Dineo in 2017—this research exposes the complex dynamics and nuanced realities of community engagement in disaster recovery processes.

Adopting a qualitative research design within the interpretative paradigm, this study illuminates both the potential benefits and significant challenges of community participation. In Kamaishi Unosumai, the findings reveal that while engagement can enhance decision-making influence and support livelihood restoration, it is frequently hindered by intra-community conflicts, demographic shifts, and the lingering effects of disaster trauma. Conversely, the Tsholotsho case demonstrates the severe repercussions of exclusion, including the abandonment of relocation and housing projects, stemming from the lack of community involvement, political manipulation, and failure to respect local cultural contexts.

This thesis argues that effective community participation—integral to the BBB framework—requires more than procedural adherence; it necessitates fundamental changes in approach. Key procedural elements for successful participation, such as equitable stakeholder representation, community empowerment, integration of indigenous knowledge, early engagement strategies, and capacity-building, are essential for the BBB initiative to achieve its goals of resilience and sustainability. The research highlights the theoretical significance of these elements and advocates for a paradigm shift towards decentralized disaster governance that genuinely incorporates community input into decision-making processes.

By providing a comparative analysis and offering both theoretical and practical insights, this study challenges existing frameworks and underscores the need for a transformative approach to community involvement. It asserts that without embracing the principles of Build Back Better and fostering genuine collaboration, reconstruction efforts will continue to falter, undermining their effectiveness and the resilience of affected communities. This thesis thus contributes to advancing the discourse on disaster management, emphasizing the critical importance of a collaborative, community-driven approach to building a more resilient and equitable society.