

RESEARCH CONNECTION

Build back better in recovery: A key to the successful community recovery from a disaster

By Etsuko Yasui, Ph.D.



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Why this research is important

If a community does not have the appropriate knowledge and skills to prepare for a disaster, it will suffer greatly if a disaster does happen—especially now that weather-related disasters are more frequent and intense due to the climate change impacts. More and more communities are affected by disasters, and some are affected repeatedly. It is important for these communities to be able to recover fast before the next disaster strikes and to also increase resilience during the recovery period. “Build back better in recovery” is widely promoted by the United Nation’s Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015) as one of its priorities for action. While this objective is essential to minimize future risks, many communities lack

What you need to know

Recovery from a disaster not only takes a physical and emotional toll on individuals but also involves prolonged and infuriating processes. This is especially true if the affected communities lack access to adequate assistance to manage their recovery. During a disaster, the local government is overwhelmed and unable to provide appropriate assistance to those who are vulnerable. Emergent organizations are often created to serve vulnerable communities, which the disaster-affected government cannot support. This study examines the emergence of the volunteer group, Machi-Communication—established in the aftermath of the 1995 Kobe Earthquake—to understand how this community-based organization assisted the Mikura community to achieve its recovery. Many emergent organizations tend to be short-lived because their services are no longer needed when the immediate needs of the communities are met. Emergent organizations leave without a trace, and there is no mechanism for them to preserve their knowledge and experiences to be utilized by future emergent groups. Machi-Communication is one of the few organizations remaining active today. It continues to support the Mikura community and other communities affected by different disasters. This study presents its accumulated wealth of knowledge and skills.

a readiness to plan and implement successful recovery. This study suggests that even a community with limited resources can achieve recovery with help from emergent organizations.

How the research was conducted

This is a longitudinal case study started as the researcher's doctoral thesis. The researcher has been visiting Machi-Communication periodically to gather information about the organization's activities as well as the community's recovery achievements through interviews, field observation, monthly newsletters, government reports, other published documents, and social media (Twitter, Facebook, Blog, and their website).

What the researcher found

Machi-Communication was created by young, spontaneous volunteers who did not have any experience as disaster volunteers prior to the 1995 Kobe earthquake. Today, Machi-Communication is a well-established non-profit organization that continues to contribute to not only meeting immediate recovery needs, but also building local knowledge, enhancing community resilience, and sharing knowledge and expertise for safer communities. This transformation was made possible by the people who are involved in this community recovery. They shared their concerns and future prospects, discussed collective problems, and found meaningful ways to approach issues. This emergent organization learned how to do it better and work together—ultimately leading to its organizational growth.

How this research can be used

The research can be used by communities and the general public to develop disaster plans. Practitioners and governments can use this research to develop policies and frameworks to improve community disaster management.

Researchers can explore further to understand how the knowledge and skills of emergent organizations are transferred to other organizations and communities.

About the researcher

Dr. Etsuko Yasui is an Associate Professor in the Department of Disaster and Emergency Studies (ADES) at Brandon University. Her research includes analyzing community development activities that enhance community resilience and the reduction of community vulnerability through collaborative work with CBOs, communities, business and industry, and the local government. She has also been involved in dam safety and served on the Dam Safety Committee for the Canadian Dam Association.

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Keywords

Emergent organizations; community disaster planning; disaster resilience; vulnerability analysis

Publications based on this research

Yasui, E. (forthcoming). Community recovery from an urban disaster: Longitudinal case study of a community-based organization in Mikura, Kobe, Japan. In J. Kushma, & J. Slick (Eds.), *Case studies in disaster recovery* (ch. 7). Elsevier.

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