Cultural dimensions of post-disaster reconstruction: the case of Tamil Nadu, India

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• What is culture?
• The importance of understanding the cultural context of disasters
• Why culture is often neglected in post-disaster reconstruction
• Consequences of culturally insensitive reconstruction
• The case of post-tsunami reconstruction in Tamil Nadu, India
• Towards culturally sensitive post-disaster reconstruction: what is to be done?
What is culture?

“Culture refers to the way of life of a group of people, its behaviours, beliefs, values, and symbols that they accept, generally without thinking about them, and that are passed along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next”
The importance of understanding the cultural context of disasters

- Culture enhances communities’ resilience to locally recurrent disasters
- Culture helps people to overcome the trauma of a disaster
- Culturally insensitive post-disaster recovery assistance causes stress, adds to people’s sufferance, and has negative impacts on their livelihoods and wellbeing
- Affected communities refuse culturally inappropriate post-disaster aid leading to a waste of resources
Why culture is often neglected in post-disaster reconstruction?

- Lack of cultural sensitivity and the “tyranny of disasters”; thinking about culture in times of recovery and reconstruction is considered a ‘luxury’
- No time allocated for community participation and for understanding local housing culture, building processes and lifestyles
- Misconceptions about “Building Back Better and safer”
- Absence of building codes and standards for traditional building technologies
Consequences of culturally insensitive reconstruction

- Negative impacts on people’s wellbeing
- Social conflicts and disarticulation
- Negative impacts on livelihoods
- Waste of aid resources; people refuse to occupy houses that are culturally inappropriate
- People need to make huge investments to adapt and transform culturally insensitive housing to their own requirements
- Unsafe transformations and adaptations due to mix of local and imported building technologies
The case of reconstruction in Tamil Nadu, India after the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004

The disaster

- 26 December 2004
- 10,880 death
- 150,000 houses destroyed (official estimate!)
- 98% of the victims belong to fishers’ communities
- 80% of death and damages in Tamil Nadu’s Nagapattinam district
- Few NGOs worked in fishing communities prior to the tsunami
- Before the disaster 90% of the people lived in traditional habitats and houses
Local livelihoods and lifestyles
Local livelihoods and lifestyles
Housing culture
The traditional house

Main spaces

1a Main entrance
1b Secondary entrance
2 Thinnai = closed veranda
3 Ullarai = internal private room
4 Pooja Arai – room for worshipping
5 Samayal kottai : external open kitchen
6 Samayal arai : external closed kitchen
7 External open bathroom
8 Toilet (if available)

Optional spaces

• Thala vasal: Open veranda
• Kooram  ullamai: intermediate private room
• Kuliyal arai: closed bathroom
The builders
Reconstruction policy

• All affected people were promised a new multi-hazard resistant house

• Government of Tamil Nadu invited NGOs to rebuild full villages on relocated sites at min. 200 m from High Tide line

• Government regulated house designs, building technologies, and plot size:
  – House size: 30 m²
  – Plot size: 125 m² in rural areas

• Building materials: Brick walls, flat RCC roof, with or without RCC columns, Brick foundations, cement mortar and plaster
Reconstruction outcomes
Social impact

- Loss of quality of life due to lack of climatic and social considerations
- Nuclearisation of extended families and social disarticulation
- Marginalisation of women
- Increased vulnerability and breakdown of informal social security systems
- Violation of human rights and social conflicts
- Loss of vernacular heritage
- Destruction of natural habitat (tree cutting)
- Waste of resources (demolition of undamaged houses and construction of inadequate houses)
Towards safe and culturally sensitive post-disaster reconstruction: what is to be done?

- Recognise the value of local housing culture in normal times → develop building codes and standards for local building technologies
- Strengthen the capacity of local builders in normal times
- Empower communities to rebuild their houses by supporting owner-driven reconstruction through:
  - Ensure community participation in reconstruction planning and policy development
  - Building standards and guidelines for local building technologies
  - Financial support provided in instalments
  - Technical guidance based on a good understanding of strength and weakness of local building technologies
  - Training of local builders
  - Monitoring and quality control
Thank you for your attention!

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