

**Session 3 Discussion Paper**

**The elusive 'window of opportunity' for risk reduction in post-disaster recovery**

Ian Christoplos, ALNAP and Glemminge Development Research  
christoplos@ystad.nu  
January 15, 2006

**The Window of Opportunity hypothesis**

This brief discussion note takes a critical look at assumptions that disaster risks are likely to be addressed in the course of post-disaster recovery efforts and was developed in particular to stimulate debate at the Provention Forum to be held in Bangkok, Thailand in February 2006. These reflections are strongly informed by issues emerging in the ALNAP Tsunami Evaluation Coalition's review of linking relief, rehabilitation and development (LRRD), for which the author is writing the synthesis report. It also draws on experience in recovery from a number of other contexts.

There is a common assumption that the post-disaster recovery phase provides a 'window of opportunity' for disaster risk reduction (DRR). This assumption is supported by the hypothesis that several factors can be capitalised upon shortly after a disaster to ensure that DRR is enhanced. The hypothesis is that DRR is more easily promoted after a disaster than before. The contributing factors to this 'ease' are said to consist of the following:

- *New awareness of risk after a disaster leads to broad consensus:* The disaster experience is expected to generate new knowledge, which is in turn expected to bring various stakeholders together around a shared awareness of the nature of risk.
- *Fault lines in development policies revealed:* The mistakes of past development policies and strategies, which resulted in increased risks, have been revealed and are better understood.
- *Institutional weaknesses exposed:* The corruption, lack of human resources and otherwise weak institutional structures that allowed high risk planning and discouraged appropriate monitoring before the disaster have been exposed.
- *Old vested interests weakened:* Those actors whose actions have contributed to creating risks have been discredited and have lost political and perhaps economic clout.
- *Bad infrastructure washed away:* The disaster has destroyed much of the infrastructure that was improperly designed, creating a 'blank slate' for 'building back better'.

- *Development and humanitarian agencies 'reminded' of disaster risks:* Official DRR goals that had been 'forgotten' before the disaster gain renewed prominence in recovery policies, plans and programmes.
- *Enhanced political will:* The desire to act (and be seen to act) to reduce the risks of future disasters is stronger than usual resulting in more proactive political leadership.
- *Money available to do things better:* Reconstruction funding is provided more generously than that which is normally available to address risks.

### Obstacles to the window

Indeed, past experience shows that these factors are present after a disaster. They do create some pressures to reduce disaster risks. The question is whether they are enough. To a large extent the Window of Opportunity hypothesis has not proven accurate. There is evidence of a flurry of talk about DRR after many major disasters but, by the time recovery programmes are put into place, the prominence of DRR is rarely much higher than it was prior to the disaster. A prime illustration of this can be found in ProVention's Recovery Lessons Studies. There were not many lessons to be learnt related to risk reduction during recovery because there was not much risk reduction happening in the contexts being reviewed. Other studies and evaluations of programming after disasters have either pointed out the lack of DRR initiatives or failed to bring up the topic at all since there was little to evaluate. For the most part, LRRD rarely includes significant links between risk reduction and the relief –rehabilitation-development nexus.

The basic reason that the seemingly common sense assumptions regarding the window of opportunity fail to materialise is that, although post-disaster recovery creates a DRR window, it also creates a myriad of other pressures. Response to a disaster is motivated by a number of principles and policy objectives. Even if DRR would seem to have a more powerful stance in policy arenas, those forces promoting other agendas are usually stronger, better organised and (above all) more firmly established in key decision-making institutions. Those promoting DRR may have to start from scratch, and in the scramble of post-disaster response this is not conducive to a strong voice, even if the clarity of DRR arguments should speak for themselves. The obstacles to the window of opportunity include the following:

- *Humanitarian principles do not mesh well with DRR:* Even though they would appear to be natural allies of the DRR agenda, humanitarians are primarily concerned with addressing acute human suffering and maintaining independence, neutrality and impartiality. For them, anything that slows response is a problem. Political will is a problem when trying to maintain independence, neutrality and impartiality. Many of the factors behind the window of opportunity theory constitute obstacles in their work. In sum, even if 'in principle' they support DRR, their 'principles' point them in a different direction.
- *Reconstruction requires weighing, prioritising and sequencing of policies and programming:* This is an area where the advocates of DRR need more nuanced and informed strategies and tactics. In order to take advantage of political will it is essential to consider the political (and indeed the democratic) process of deciding which priorities should be implemented and when. There are hard choices that need to be made after a disaster and an understanding of the pressures to take alternative courses of action requires more political savvy than normative hypotheses.
- *Inflation of mainstreaming pressures:* The 'solution' to the aforementioned factor is usually assumed to be to mainstream DRR. In the recovery phase mainstreaming does not work. There are too many mainstreaming agendas for most decision-makers and operational actors to digest. Complaints are heard that 'everything has to be about everything' as staff tick the boxes of poverty alleviation, gender equity, HIV/AIDS,

sustainable development, good governance, etc. In many organisations there are dedicated focal points (or entire departments) working to ensure that these other mainstreaming goals are not forgotten. Does DRR have a chance if it is the last item on the list of mainstreaming boxes to be ticked?

- *Development policies are forgotten in recovery:* Many strategies to promote DRR assume that inclusion in PRSPs and efforts to use the coattails of the MDGs are the best ways forward. These documents have little influence on the post-disaster recovery agenda. In over 24,000 documents collected by the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition there are only thirteen mentions of the MDGs and one mention of PRSPs. Pre-disaster strategies for promoting DRR may be all but useless in the post-disaster scramble for resources. If the window of opportunity is to be realised, then DRR advocates will need to think on their feet to identify new entry points into the policy debate.
- *Speed versus quality and rights versus sustainability:* The tsunami recovery process includes ample evidence of how efforts to ensure that the 'rights' of people to rapidly obtain homes and livelihoods have also led to depletion of natural resources and increased risk. In the buffer zone debate in Sri Lanka and Aceh, DRR has come to be widely seen as an obstacle to effective programming rather than a goal. It has made a mess of the project cycle. Getting people out of tents and into houses and off of food aid and into jobs become the most pressing issues for politicians, donors and disaster affected people. Abstract fears of future disasters are put on the back burner. The participation that is the cornerstone of effective DRR is rejected by many impatient would-be participants. This shift of interest is aggravated by the media, on the hunt for 'victims' who have 'had their rights violated', and by donors who want to have their money spent fast.
- *Stylised images of villains and heroes discourage empirical understanding of risks and vulnerabilities:* Real DRR needs to be anchored in reality, but reality is not a driving force in how many agencies design their recovery programmes. They like to see small-scale fishermen in fragile little boats and picturesque peasants hoeing hillsides and planting trees. They have heard that shrimp/fish farmers and hotel owners are bad people. Like any stereotypes there may be a degree of truth somewhere in these aloof images, but they are not sufficient for understanding the political economy of why people dig shrimp ponds and the choices faced by a disaster affected person trying to decide whether to start a new farm in the jungle or to try to get a job as a hotel waiter. Effective DRR must be anchored in these realities, but these realities are not easily inserted into recovery programming.
- *Institutions may matter, but they are often simply not there:* Many of the recommendations put forth by the DRR community include long lists of the things that governments, particularly local authorities, are supposed to do, or at least do better. For several reasons we may have to think more about how to make do with less local government intervention after a disaster. A major part of the civil service may have perished in the disaster (as in Aceh) or due to pre-existing factors (such as HIV/AIDS in parts of Africa). Rebuilding human resources may take years. International agencies may have 'poached' the best and the brightest from the public sector, and may have gutted local civil society as well. Many street-level bureaucrats may simply have their hands full rubber-stamping construction plans, greeting visiting delegations and trying to patch up their own homes after the disaster. Katrina resulted in mass public sector lay-offs due to shortfalls in local tax revenues. A pragmatic DRR agenda needs to include an understanding of these limits and their implications for what can actually be done.
- *Too much faith in platitudes:* The failure to confront most of the factors above can be traced to an undue faith within the DRR community in the power of our own platitudes. These are factors that should be staring us in the face when we engage in the

whirlwind of recovery planning. Too often the main actors who are promoting DRR complacently trot out the same tired powerpoint that they have been using since long before the disaster in the expectation that 'now somebody will listen'. Maybe some people will politely pretend to listen at first, but for a typical country representative there are also those 471 other coordination meetings that have to be attended this week, so attention spans quickly wane.

### **Finding the window latch may just take a little time**

This does not mean that the hypothesis is entirely inaccurate. The window of opportunity may just take longer to open. The window of opportunity might even be more apparent in the 'post-recovery phase' rather than the immediate 'post-disaster reconstruction phase'.

After Mitch, the grand 'transformation' that was hailed in the Stockholm Declaration did not take place, but Mitch did provide the stimulus for a significant measure of legislative reform, strengthening of strategically important institutions and IFI/bilateral investment. In Vietnam, the floods of the late 1990s stimulated a revival of pre-existing government commitments to DRR, even if these did not feature strongly in the recovery effort itself. In India and other countries there have been positive reforms of the insurance sector that are undoubtedly informed by the recovery experience, even if these reforms have not come quickly enough to steer recovery programming itself.

These examples point to the fact that recovery is by nature a rushed process, whereas effective DRR requires reflection, discussion and consensus building. This does not mean that the window of opportunity does not exist to get a head-start during the recovery phase. It rather indicates that an astute approach must build upon a thorough understanding of the various rationales that influence different stakeholders during this pressurised period. Caution is needed to ensure that advocacy does not supersede analysis of the political and economic implications of enhancing future DRR.

The entry points for an effective early insertion of DRR into recovery agendas may not necessarily be in grand frameworks, but instead in the sectoral programmes that different agencies are engaged in. Better macro level planning is important, but the day-to-day struggles to deal with shelter and livelihoods take up the bulk of people's time and effort. Inductive strategies that help to cast light on broader disaster risks with narrower and immediate concerns may be the best way forward.