



# The role of community leadership in disaster recovery projects: Tsunami lessons from Japan

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## Abstract

While project management has been effectively applied to many fields and sectors, disaster management has yet to see its full benefits. This inductive study generates insights about the nature and role of ‘active leadership’ (LaBrosse, 2007) in the context of a community led recovery project in Minami-sanriku, Japan, an area affected by the 2011 tsunami. Community leaders displayed ‘active leadership’ evidenced in 1) the effective identification of project objectives and relevant stakeholders, 2) the efficient management of stakeholder engagement and 3) the robust understanding of the socio-cultural context in which the Nagasuka Beach Recovery Project took place. This multi-disciplinary and inductive study highlights the need to train project managers (be they community leaders or otherwise) in both technical and soft leadership skills: the former ensure that Project Management methodologies are clearly understood and applied; the latter facilitate the adaptation of these methodologies to the specific socio-cultural locales in which recovery projects take place.

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## 1. Introduction

While the project management approach has been effectively applied to many fields and sectors, disaster management has yet to see its full benefits. This state of affairs is due to the fact that disaster recovery projects have unique features such as emergent strategies, uncertainty, time urgency, community vulnerability and stakeholder issues and, therefore, pose different challenges when compared to typical projects (Baroudi and Rapp, 2014; Crawford et al., 2012). Olshansky et al. (2012) argue that time compression makes disasters unique and distorts the disciplinary lenses that would work under normal circumstances. This requires a more contextualised application of project management methodologies

and trans-disciplinary research rather than discipline bound studies. Our study draws on project management, disaster management and organisation theory to inductively develop insights grounded in empirical realities.

Although disaster management has been described by some commentators as a form of public project management (Moe and Pathranarakul, 2006), the application of project management to disaster projects remains limited to immediate, aid-type fast responses rather than to medium and longer term recovery projects. Our study documents the application of aspects of project management in a medium term recovery project, namely the Nagasuka Beach Recovery Project based in Minami-sanriku (an area in Japan that was hit and severely impacted by the 2011 tsunami). Our overall objective is to explore the meanings and working of ‘active leadership’ (a project management concept coined by LaBrosse in 2007) in this community-based recovery project and the extent to which it contributes to the success of the project.

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We do so by asking two research questions:

- Q1) How does ‘active leadership’ work in the context of Nagasuka Beach Recovery Project?
- Q2) What is the relationship between ‘active leadership’ and the outcome of the project?

The research was carried out between November 2013 and November, 2015. Its focus was on the role played by the local community leaders (who became project leaders) in engaging, liaising and managing multiple stakeholders while accounting for the socio-cultural context in which the project took place. We are not the first researchers to argue that ‘active leadership’ is at the heart of effective stakeholder engagement and management in recovery projects (Baroudi and Rapp, 2014). We contribute to this body of literature by documenting how ‘active leadership’ was enacted by the Minami-sanriku community leaders managing the Nagasuka beach recovery project and how this process facilitated the success of the project.

The paper starts with a literature review of the main stakeholders involved in disaster recovery efforts and extant stakeholder issues identified by current research. It then reviews state of art research on the role of project management approaches in disaster recovery projects, highlighting a specific gap in the literature with regards to role of ‘active leadership’ in managing stakeholder engagement in community-based recovery projects. General and specific background information about the case study is then provided, along with a discussion of why the case was selected and how the data was collected and analysed. The main findings are outlined, followed by a discussion of the contribution made by study to bridging the fields of project management and disaster recovery, its limitations and future areas for research.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Stakeholders involved in disaster recovery

A great deal of research investigates the role of various stakeholders in disaster recovery such as business organisations, government, NGOs, volunteer groups, international agencies as well as the role of the disaster stricken community itself.

Business organisations are one of the most important stakeholders in the process of recovery. An important strand of the literature on disaster recovery focuses on the restoration and recovery of business organisations. Studies of reinstating order in the retail system (Fujioka, 2012; Ilie, 2011; Khazai et al., 2011) and of managing supply chains in crisis situations (Bradley, 2014; Day et al., 2012; Holguin-Veras et al., 2014; Kumar and Havey, 2013; Park et al., 2013; Mackenzie et al., 2012; Matsuo, 2015) abound. These studies contribute to a better understanding of the recovery process, as business continuity and disaster recovery are often intertwined. However, these studies focus on large businesses and global supply chains. Smaller businesses have received less attention in the literature despite the fact that they are the backbone of the economy (Marshall and Scharnk, 2014). Research on SME recovery tends to take either a macro-economic perspective (Chang et al., 2010) or a community based approach (Olshansky and

Chang, 2009; Olshansky et al., 2012), rather than seeing recovery of small businesses as an iterative process in the context of individual, family/household, and community recovery which unfolds over time (Marshall and Scharnk, 2014).

Another strand of research identifies the important roles of government, NGOs, volunteer groups and other international agencies (Avenell, 2012; Bosner, 2012; Ismail et al., 2014a, 2014b; Von Meding et al., 2009; Sazanami, 1998; Takayose, 1999) in aiding the disaster recovery, especially in terms of handling disaster relief, funding, infrastructure rebuilding and the quick deployment of relevant agencies. Critics are quick to point to the shortfalls of government-led recovery and the inefficiency of the traditional model of top-down governance (Hayashi, 2012; Sorensen and Funck, 2007), in terms of its inability to understand and meet the needs of the local community (Murakami and Wood, 2014) due to inadequate leadership (Matsumura, 2011). For example, Comerio’s (1998) research on urban housing recovery raises important questions about the role of government, arguing for a fundamental rethinking of government relationships with the communities affected, while Olshansky et al. (2006) question the ability of current government approaches to bridge regional and national policies with local planning and reconstruction decisions.

Community involvement is also seen by many authors as an important ingredient in the successful management of disaster recovery (Aldrich, 2011; Ireñi-saban, 2012; Murphy, 2007; Shaw, 2014; Takazawa and Williams, 2011; Vallance, 2011; Yasui, 2007). Research by Evans (2002) shows that the Japanese practice of Machi-zukuri (community-based planning) worked well in one of the districts in Kobe due to the fact that there was a high level of civic activism already in place. However, in another Kobe district that was reconstructed after 1995 Hanshin Earthquake and which had low activism levels, the government had appropriated the rhetoric of Machi-zukuri within a more conventional model of urban planning and reconstruction. Despite inconclusive evidence, Machi-zukuri is argued to be radically different from the traditional top-down model that remains dominant in Japan (Matanle, 2011; Sorensen and Funck, 2007). Recent studies (Ireñi-Saban, 2012; Murakami and Wood, 2014; Okada et al., 2013) suggest that community-based decision making is an effective approach in terms of understanding local needs and enhancing resilience (Plough et al., 2013; Chandra et al., 2013) in disaster rebuilding with the view to ‘build back better’. The concept of ‘building back better’ has received much attention from scholars of disaster recovery strategies and policy makers in recent years (Alexander, 2006; Clinton, 2006; Fan, 2013; Kennedy et al., 2008; Lloyd-Jones, 2007; Mannakkara and Wilkinson, 2012). Central to these debates is the acknowledgement that communities must drive their own recovery working in partnership with other relevant stakeholders (Baroudi and Rapp, 2014; Coles and Buckle, 2004), a point also embraced by our study.

### 2.2. Stakeholder issues in disaster recovery projects

As the literature above demonstrates, disaster recovery projects require the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders. The

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