



Managing legitimacy: The Christchurch post-disaster reconstruction

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Abstract

Large-scale, post-disaster infrastructure reconstruction projects confront multiple challenges. These include working in a demanding, resource-constrained environment; working to compressed timeframes; addressing community expectations; and protecting the local economy affected by the disaster. Following a series of major earthquakes in Canterbury New Zealand, an innovative organisational arrangement was developed in order to manage the extensive infrastructure reconstruction. This research investigated how SCIRT, the project-based alliance organisation that was created for the disaster recovery, addressed these challenges in handling the vast programme of projects. A key finding was that establishing the internal and external legitimacy of this organisation was a critical element that determined the effectiveness of the recovery work. Managing legitimacy perceptions among the multiple stakeholders is identified as a core task, and a little-recognised critical success factor, in the use of alliances for large-scale disaster-recovery projects.

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1. Introduction

Across the globe, the increasing number of natural disasters has brought devastating impacts in terms of death and injury, as well as major infrastructure damage that requires costly, large-scale reconstruction projects (van der Vegt et al., 2015). The literature has outlined a number of the challenges faced by such large and complex post-disaster reconstruction projects (Chang et al., 2011a, 2011b, 2012a, 2012b; Mamula-Seadon and McLean, 2015). These challenges include several central themes; (a) problems of resource availability, (b) stakeholder expectations around reconstruction, and (c) protecting the local economy, already impacted by the disaster.

The major resourcing challenges derive from the twin problems of reduced resource availability in a post-disaster

environment, and the emerging demands from the much greater than normal scale of the post-disaster reconstruction activity, together creating a situation where the total demands can significantly outstrip supply. Although resource constraints issues are not unique to post-disaster recovery projects, the high costs, the tight timeframes, and the massive volume of resources needed, mean that those elements take on a significantly new dimension compared to other projects.

There are also multiple stakeholders who exert a major influence on recovery projects. Central and local government, business groups, and local communities all have their own interests at stake, and strong expectations regarding the way the work is conducted, its quality and the degree of urgency. Reconstruction projects have to compress what would normally be decades of normal infrastructure replacement into an extremely shortened timeframe. There are also expectations regarding who should be involved in the reconstruction work. Residents typically believe that local firms should have a prominent role in the reconstruction process, as a key part of bolstering the recovery of the local economy.

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Stakeholder engagement is seen as a key element of post-disaster projects. Crawford et al. (2013) propose that participatory project management approaches, which acknowledge the involvement and influence of these stakeholders, can contribute to successful disaster recovery and community stability. However, there is limited information around how this is best implemented.

This paper draws on an in-depth case study of a major, post-disaster reconstruction project in Christchurch, New Zealand. The study identifies how stakeholder engagement was achieved through processes centred upon achieving legitimacy. The notion of legitimacy, defined as ‘a generalized perception or assumption that the action of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate’ (Suchman, 1995, p. p.574), has received little attention in the project management literature. In this study, legitimacy was found to be pivotal for the viability of the project as it influences stakeholder commitment, with resource support contingent on the degree to which organisational forms involved in reconstruction are seen as desirable, proper, or appropriate (Aldrich and Fiol, 1994; Suchman, 1995). The processes of gaining and maintaining legitimacy served as a framework for obtaining the engagement and support of the multiple stakeholders in a post-disaster reconstruction project.

2. Background

In September 2010 a magnitude 7.1 earthquake struck the Canterbury region of New Zealand. The epicentre was 40 km west of the city of Christchurch and the quake caused significant damage to buildings and infrastructure (Potter et al., 2015). The territorial authority, the Christchurch City Council, contracted five local construction companies to repair the city’s horizontal infrastructure. The contractors were key commercial New Zealand companies.¹ The work allocation was relatively uncomplicated, with each contractor allocated a specific geographic area to restore.

Frequent aftershocks continued in the months after the initial tremor. Then on 22 February 2011 the situation changed radically with a major magnitude 6.3 tremor. Unlike the earlier events, this occurred close to the heart of the city and at a depth of only 5 km, bringing far more devastating consequences, with 185 fatalities and thousands of injuries, as well as extensive physical damage affecting infrastructure, homes, and workplaces (Al-Shaqsi et al., 2013; Ardagh et al., 2012).

The seismic activity had extensive impacts on the local built, economic, social, and natural environments (Potter et al., 2015). A large proportion of the city’s residential and commercial premises were severely damaged; many residents and organisations were forced to relocate. The ongoing tremors, and continued disruption to areas such as infrastructure, had negative impacts on businesses and employment, as well as adversely affecting education, health and mental wellbeing of residents (Brown et al., 2015; de Vries and Hamilton, 2016; Mamula-

Seadon and McLean, 2015; Morgan et al., 2015; Nilakant et al., 2016).

The extent of infrastructure damage in the February event was ten times greater than the earlier, September event. The central business district was shut-down for safety reasons, with parts of the city remaining closed to the public for more than two years. The scale of the damage, and the restoration work needed, meant that the model for managing the recovery from the initial September 2010 tremor was no longer applicable. The new circumstances demanded a whole-city approach to manage the urgent restoration of the vital infrastructure amidst a difficult and constantly changing environment.

While a body of research evidence points to the benefits of using local agents in disaster management and recovery (Ke et al., 2015; Mamula-Seadon and McLean, 2015; Perry, 2007; Stevenson et al., 2014), the conundrum however, was that no single local organisation had the resources to manage the immense scale of work. The alternative option, of bringing in a large organisation from another country was also problematic as it would have clashed with citizens’ expectations that local companies should be involved, as well as producing a range of logistical problems (see for example Ke et al., 2015; Mamula-Seadon and McLean, 2015; Perry, 2007; Stevenson et al., 2014). Therefore, as a solution to this dilemma, an innovative, experimental organisational model was created to address these extra-ordinary project demands.

Drawing on previous experiences of commercial alliances in road construction projects (see for example Guo et al., 2014), an innovative organisational arrangement was used, with a formal alliance formed between eight major parties. Three of these were the client organisations, who supplied the funding, and for whom the work was being done. These funder-clients represented very different sectors, covering local government (the Christchurch City Council), the national roading agency (New Zealand Transport Authority), and an agency specially formed by central government to manage the disaster recovery (the Christchurch Earthquake Rebuild Authority). The other five organisations were the contractor companies involved in delivering the reconstruction projects.

This new alliance organisation was named the Stronger Christchurch Infrastructure Rebuild Team (SCIRT). Six months after the disaster, SCIRT began work as a project-based alliance, taking on the delivery of approximately 600 major projects for repairing or replacing horizontal infrastructure. The organisation had a demanding timeframe for completing this reconstruction work, with a planned end date of December 2016, at which time the organisation would be disbanded.

This paper is an in-depth study of SCIRT, its rather unique organisational design, and how it dealt with the major challenges of the recovery. The overall reconstruction of the city’s infrastructure represents a large-scale overall project, which was described as “a programme of projects”. The research identifies how the customised approach of this alliance achieved the delivery expectations of cost, time and quality outcomes. Specifically the paper discusses how managing stakeholders and participatory project management occurred through the management of legitimacy. The notion of legitimacy emerged as a

¹ City Care, Downer, Fulton Hogan, and a joint venture between McConnell Dowell and Fletchers

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