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## Governance and recovery: comparing recent disaster recoveries in Sri Lanka and New Zealand

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### Abstract

Governance is understood to have considerable influence on the success of recoveries following a natural disaster. What constitutes good governance and successful recovery in these circumstances? This question is discussed in relation to two recent recovery processes. Sri Lanka has, for all intents and purposes, recovered from the tsunami that struck there and other parts of southern Asia in 2004. Christchurch, New Zealand was devastated by a sequence of earthquakes during 2010 and 2011 and recovery there is now well under way. The paper discusses the governance structures that have guided these two recoveries. While it is understood that the effects of disasters could potentially be life long and recovery from them complex, compatibility of the process and outcomes in relation to cultural norms and the critical issue of housing are the key issues discussed across the two cases.

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### 1. Introduction

It is understood that governance and leadership will have considerable influence on the outcomes of rebuilding and recovery efforts following unexpected natural disasters. While the literature around disaster recovery continues to grow, significant gaps in our understanding of just how governance affects recovery remain [1]. This can in part be attributed to the fact that each recovery is unique, with a broad range of possible influences. Case studies can therefore

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be useful for highlighting important issues, particularly when comparisons are made. This paper discusses efforts to rebuild the areas affected by the 2004 tsunami event in Sri Lanka and the 2010–2011 earthquakes that struck the city of Christchurch, New Zealand. While acknowledging the devastation caused to people, their economies and social infrastructure, these events also created opportunities for improvement. In addressing how well these opportunities have been capitalized on, this paper contextualizes reconstruction efforts in their social, political and economic circumstances. The research is informed by the stakeholder interviews, post-occupancy evaluation and expert analysis carried out by the authors. It is further developed with reference to literature that focusses on aspects of each recovery, and that concerned with governance issues.

Post disaster recoveries are characterized by uncertainty, particularly as people's expectations and the influence of market forces cannot be predicted. These vary according to the local culture, resource availability, economic influences, and capacity. Two factors in rebuilding success after a disaster are the speed with which it takes place and the quality of the outcomes [1, 2]. These are closely linked and changes in one will generally lead to changes in the other, particularly when costs are also considered [3]. However, recovery should also account for the psychological and socio-cultural interests of affected communities [4, 5]. Given these broad aims, priorities must be struck between matters such as housing, infrastructure replacement, economic development and building community resilience. The best way to lead recovery processes in such variable circumstances is complex, but should be addressed in light of the marked increases in disaster related damage in the developed and developing worlds.

## 2. Recovery in Sri Lanka

In the immediate aftermath of the Boxing Day Tsunami, which killed more than 37,000 people and displaced over a million more in 12 of Sri Lanka's 14 coastal districts [6], people found shelter with family, friends and strangers and in temples, churches and schools. Relief and rescue efforts commenced before the initial shock wore off, before detailed reports of the devastation spread, and before the arrival of international humanitarian aid. The protracted civil war came to a halt as both factions put aside decades of differences to focus on rebuilding the nation. Conflict, ethnic and religious differences and economic disparity were forgotten as assistance in the form of medical personnel, manpower, food, water, clothing, medication and vehicles were volunteered from all segments of society. Central government acted speedily to set up relief and rescue operations. The feeling of nationhood was strong in the face of the disaster and led to a surreal moment in Sri Lankan history. Underlying the success of the immediate rescue and relief operations was the strong culture of extended family, informal community support networks and charity. However, the government's disregard of this connected social infrastructure, and preferences for 'tool kit' approaches to recovery and reconstruction, and foreign donor involvement would later undermine the rebuild [6].

### 2.1. Governance and leadership

The attitude of the Sri Lankan government towards the rebuilding of the nation was predominantly paternalistic. It was informed by a local culture of charitable assistance for affected communities and recognition of the development opportunity presented by the disaster. Both attitudes pursued the typical paternalistic approach of 'we know what's best'. This led to a failure on the part of government to recognize the needs and capacities of affected communities, particularly the rural culture of self-reliance shaped by a protracted civil war and traditional livelihoods based on community networks, and to include them in the rebuilding of their lives and communities [6]. Within two days of the tsunami and with cross party support, the government set up three task forces, and created government agencies with funds and the power to disperse these for relief efforts [7]. Each task force had a clear role. The first was to focus on rescue and relief (TAFRER) and the second on logistics, law and order (TAFLOL). These were to be united at the end of the relief and rescue period as the Task Force for Relief (TAFOR) responsible for relief packages for assisting with long term recovery. The third was the Task Force for Rebuilding the Nation (TAFREN) which within twenty days of establishment released its initial plan of action, to 'build back better' and provide a 50 m<sup>2</sup> house including all amenities to everyone whose home was destroyed or damaged beyond repair and relocated out of the newly imposed 100–200m no-build coastal buffer zone [7]. TAFREN then advised that a committee of experts from the government and the private sector had already prepared type plans for the houses and land for relocation had been identified [7].

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