



## Field evaluation of the transitional phase in post-disaster recovery

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### Abstract

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In many disasters, the recovery process includes a phase of transition from the early emergency, characterised by a particular set of needs, and the long term, which is characterised by replacement and developmental reconstruction, and, one hopes, by rehabilitation of governance, social networks and livelihoods. In the international experience of recovery from disaster, this phase has frequently been the subject of heated debate. Many questions arise. In the context of recovery from disaster, what exactly is a transitional phase? How should it be recognised and characterised? Is there always a need for a transitional phase to connect the short-term emergency period with the long-term reconstruction phase? Is a transitional phase possible in all cases? How would we recognise it, if it occurs, and especially how would we identify its beginning and end? Are actions during the transitional phase effective?

This paper presents a temporal model of the phases of disaster and the actions that are usually associated with them. This enables one, in general terms, to consider the transition phase in context and assess how important it is to the recovery process. It also opens the way to a debate on the question, transition to what, and from where? The rest of the paper endeavours to answer that with respect to some examples from recent disasters.

The Japanese earthquake and tsunami of March 2011 devastated 433 sq. km of coastal land in northeast Honshu. Reconstruction is moving forward with unprecedented rapidity, and much of it will be completed within seven years of the disaster. Prefabricated accommodation has been carefully designed, widely standardised and situated in appropriate places. There is an unwritten pact between survivors and the Japanese Government that citizens can rely on public administrations at all levels to pursue and complete the recovery process in their local area. However, the level of community participation in the process is relatively low and some serious issues about the level of structural protection, and the drawbacks of the structures, are not being fully and openly addressed.

In November 2013, Cyclone Haiyan (Yolanda) devastated coastal areas around Tacloban in the Philippines. Warning was fairly comprehensive, although evacuation was less successful. Relief was initially slow to arrive, and many families lacked assistance for months. Transitional shelter tended to be poorly constructed and highly vulnerable to further storms. Months after the disaster, few residents of the coastal zone had any idea about their long term prospects, and hence the 'transitional' phase was hardly a transition at all.

In central Italy after the 2009 L'Aquila earthquake, the approach to the problem of housing 67,500 survivors involved a radical departure from the usual strategies. They were left in tents and hotels for up to nine months and then resettled in lavishly expensive transitional housing. Massive imbalances in expenditure appear to have severely inhibited the long-term recovery. The result is a situation of relative stasis. Similar conditions were encountered in Mexico after landslides and floods in Puebla State, where the tendency was not to extend the recovery process very far beyond the transitional phase.

The conclusion to be derived from these examples is that a transitional phase may be necessary in some cases, but it needs to have a clear objective (transition to what?) and clear links to preceding and succeeding phases. It also need an impetus of change and an incentive to proceed to full recovery.

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### Roundtable theme

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- Supporting urban risk reduction through reconstruction

### Author's Biography



David Alexander is Professor of Risk and Disaster Reduction at University College London. His books include "Natural Disasters", "Confronting Catastrophe", "Principles of Emergency Planning and Management" and "Recovery from Disaster" (with Ian Davis). He is Editor-in-Chief of the International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction. His research and teaching interests include natural hazards, earthquake disasters and emergency planning and management. He is currently working on a new book on emergency planning.