



International Recovery Forum 2021: Building Back Better from COVID-19 and Compound Disasters

January 22, 2021

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a global health crisis with devastating socioeconomic impacts. Simultaneously, countries worldwide are forced to confront the challenge of managing compound risks from natural hazards, brought about by the increasing intensity and frequency of climate hazards, recurring geophysical risks, and the pandemic. Countries such as the Philippines and Vanuatu dealing with tropical cyclones while responding to the pandemic have incurred huge losses that have multiplied with the occurrence of a secondary or tertiary event. The ability of governments to act on the consequences of disasters have been constrained by limited resources.

Compared to more episodic disasters caused by natural hazards, the COVID-19 pandemic is a long and protracted emergency. The fluid, back-and-forth nature of the crisis presents additional, unique challenges for recovery, unlike when a disaster occurs and recovery immediately follows. The pandemic has disproportionately impacted poor and vulnerable groups, who typically have the least resources and resilience to begin with, and often experience greater challenges with recovery. Recovery in the context of this crisis will depend on assessing the impacts, designing targeted recovery programmes and investments, developing and strengthening social protections, aligning recovery priorities with climate and overall development priorities, among other key considerations.

The International Recovery Forum 2021 was held in a hybrid modality on 22 January 2021, on the theme, "Building Back Better from Compound Disasters: Practical Cases and Lessons for Recovery from Natural Hazards and COVID-19". The annual forum is a key activity managed by the International Recovery Platform to share experiences, learning, and evidence in resilient recovery and building back better, and in support of progress against Priority 4 of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030.

Attended by 340 participants from 49 countries, the forum featured keynote presentations and panel discussions on early lessons learned in recovery, and opportunities to build back better, greener, more equitable and resilient from COVID-19 and compound disasters. This summary of the forum summarizes the proceedings and main outcomes of the forum. It explores the context of COVID-19 and compound disasters, shares experiences and lessons learned, and presents key recommendations for recovery.



Opening Session Speakers:

Mr. Jared MERCADANTE, Chair of the IRP Steering Committee (World Bank). Mr. OKONOGI Hachirou Minister of State for Disaster Management, Government of Japan. Mr. IDO Toshizo, Governor of Hyogo Prefecture.

Keynote Speakers:

Mr. KAWATA Yoshiaki, Executive Director of the Disaster Reduction and Human Renovation Institution (DRI). Mr. Stéphane HALLEGATTE, Lead Economist, Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery (GFDRR), World Bank. Moderator: Ms. Yuki MATSUOKA, Head, UNDRR Office in Japan.

Panel One Speakers:

Ms. Maria Alejandra MUÑOZ SEMINARIO, Vice President, Government of the Republic of Ecuador. Ms. Bambi KRAUS, National Tribal Affairs Advisor, Federal Emergency Management Agency, Government of the United States of America. Mr. Vijay PADMANABHAN, Director, Urban Infrastructure, Southeast Asia Department, Asian Development Bank. Mr. Joy ELAMON, Director General, Kerala Institute of Local Administration. Moderator: Ms. Rita MISSAL, Recovery Advisor, a.i., Disaster Risk Reduction and Recovery for Building Resilience Team, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Panel Two Speakers:

Mr. Malcolm DALESA, PDNA and Recovery Strategy Coordinator, Department of Strategic Policy, Planning and Aid Coordination, Office of the Prime Minister, Government of Vanuatu. Mr. Ronald JACKSON, Head, Disaster Risk Reduction and Recovery for Building Resilience Team, UNDP. Mr. Mark JOVEN, Undersecretary, Department of Finance, Government of the Philippines. Ms. Bernadía Irawati TJANDRADEWI, Secretary General, Asia-Pacific, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG). Moderator: Ms. Paola ALBRITO, Chief of Branch, Intergovernmental processes, Interagency Co-operation and Partnerships, United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR).

Closing Speakers:

Ms. Mami MIZUTORI, Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General (SRSG) for Disaster Risk Reduction, Head of the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR). Mr. MURAKAWA Soshi, Director, Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, on behalf of Co-Chair of the IRP Steering Committee.

Experiences and Lessons Learned from COVID-19 and Compound Disasters

COVID-19 has shown how pre-existing vulnerabilities and risks can exacerbate impacts. Countries and populations also experience disparate impacts from the pandemic. Due to the systemic nature of risk, a multi-sectoral, multi-dimensional, and systems approach is crucial in understanding interactions and interlinkages to reduce present and future risks from natural hazards and pandemics. Response and recovery measures addressing COVID-19 and concurrent disasters present many lessons which can inform recovery in the long-term.

Readiness. Inadequate investments in healthcare, education, and social protection systems exposed the vulnerability of sectors and systems and have significantly reduced countries' ability to recover. However, countries that prioritized disaster risk reduction and implemented prevention and preparedness measures before COVID-19 exhibited a certain level of resilience. Recovery and managing uncertain risks in the future will benefit from flexible financing and more investments in early warning and preparedness for systems, institutions, and human resources. Governments can improve recovery readiness by pre-arranging flexible financing before disasters strike, such as disaster contingent financing and other emergency loans. The case of the Philippines showed that maintaining a strong fiscal position can also facilitate easier access to post-disaster financing.

Evidence-informed decision-making. The COVID-19 Recovery Needs Assessments (CRNAs) conducted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have looked at the pandemic's socio-economic impacts from a multi-dimensional perspective, given the number of other hazards and risks present in many countries (UNDP, 2020). The Post-Disaster Needs Assessment methodology has been modified to accommodate the unique challenges that COVID-19 presented. Each assessment covered multiple sectors and socio-economic issues (e.g., formal and informal sectors, small and medium enterprises, employment, etc.). These socio-economic assessments have played a key role in facilitating the development of strategies to build back better and more inclusively. In the case of Ecuador, CRNAs helped identify priority areas for intervention for the poor and the most vulnerable, including such areas as health, food, employment, and currency stability. However, targeted recovery programmes depend on good quality data and information management systems. For example, in recent experiences, inadequate data on informal or small businesses and poor and vulnerable people, caused delays in assessments and timely, appropriately targeted recovery resources.

Ensuring no one is left behind. The CRNAs brought attention to vulnerabilities, exclusion, discrimination, and the effects of pre-existing inequalities that have worsened the impacts of COVID-19. The assessments showed how marginalized groups—people with

KEY MESSAGES

- **Risks cannot be treated in isolation.** A multi-sectoral, multi-dimensional, and systems approach is needed to better understand risk interactions, considering present and future risks.
- Recovering countries and communities will need to consider how they can **build back better, greener, more resilient and equitable.**
- A long-term vision for recovery should align with **sustainable development, climate change, and risk reduction agendas.** Recovery strategies should prioritize programmes that can meet both immediate recovery needs and long-term resilience objectives.
- **Social protections need to be expanded, strengthened, and sustained** to mitigate the longer-term impacts of the crisis, and build resilience against future shocks.
- **Partnership** is key to undertaking an integrated and transdisciplinary approach to maximize co-benefits to society.
- **Needs assessments underpin timely, appropriately targeted recovery programmes.** Multiple rounds of assessment will be needed to understand long-term impacts and evolving needs. Data and information systems need to be strengthened to enable evidence-informed decision-making.
- **Local actions** have provided innovative and effective solutions and will be key to building resilient and sustainable cities.





disabilities, women, migrants, refugees, indigenous communities, etc.—have been disproportionately impacted. The vulnerability of American Indians and Alaskan natives due to pre-existing health conditions, for example, highlighted the lack of good healthcare available to them. By identifying disparate impacts and their underlying pre-existing inequalities and vulnerabilities, the CRNAs can be a roadmap for a more inclusive recovery.

Timely decision-making. The uncertainty that the pandemic has brought has made it necessary for leaders to make quick decisions, and develop plans to decelerate and reduce losses, and promote recovery. Timely assessment and decision-making made it possible for rapid and appropriate actions to be undertaken particularly with the most vulnerable populations and at high-risk areas.

Local action. In the recovery, local-level actions have been as important as national-level actions. With the pandemic limiting opportunities for international support, in-country and local capacities have been essential for assessment, recovery planning, and implementation. National governments have generally provided guidance and funding, while subnational governments and communities undertook local-level action. United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) observed that solidarity between local governments has facilitated mutual support between cities for recovery. In Kerala, India, strong local governance has enabled coordinated systems and efforts among local government, communities, and other stakeholders. Volunteerism and the creation of self-help groups brought about innovative initiatives that have benefited communities.

Recovery strategy. Countries have sought to align recovery priorities and strategy with their overall development, climate and sustainability agendas. Governments have reprioritized budgets so that sectors can deliver recovery interventions and aligned activities and budgets with an identified set of programmed activities. Vanuatu experienced Tropical Cyclone Harold in the context of COVID-19, developed a recovery strategy that explicitly linked to the National Sustainable Development Plan, which is the country's long-term development plan. Fiji has also worked to prioritize recovery investments that could contribute to its immediate recovery objectives, and which can also contribute to its long-term resilience and sustainability priorities.

Recommendations to Build Back Better

As countries begin their recovery, they face the challenge of recovering from both significant short-term losses and the long-term impacts from the pandemic and other disasters. Assessments provide a snapshot in time of impacts, but the protracted nature of the crisis and compounding shocks of disasters require additional rounds of assessment to better understand the long-term impacts and the interplay between economic, social, and natural systems to build back better. Governments will have to consider how they can build back better – to build more resilient societies against future shocks, and pivot toward new development pathways.

Build back better for long-term resilience. As governments consider strategies to deploy recovery funds and programmes to address pandemic and disaster impacts, they should identify spending priorities that deliver on both short-term recovery needs and long-term resilience objectives. For example, investments in infrastructure resilience can create employment in the short term, and pay long-term dividends by avoiding future losses. The costs of investing in greater resilience can be relatively low when compared to the costs of future disaster losses.

Build back greener. COVID-19 presents a unique opportunity to act on climate change in recovery, through investments in green growth, nature-based solutions, and renewable energy (IRP, 2020). Smart buildings, sustainable urban and land use planning, environmentally-friendly transport, and climate-smart agriculture can provide significant co-benefits, including for job creation. Countries' recovery strategies can focus on enabling green transitions, investing in socioeconomic development, and prioritizing the most vulnerable. Azerbaijan, for example, focused its recovery strategy on three areas: a new social contract, closing the digital divide, and promoting green transitions. In cities, there is a need to reimagine how urban areas are designed and built post-pandemic. While the pandemic has not damaged urban infrastructure the way other hazards might, urban planners have opportunities to direct recovery resources with consideration of ecosystems and biodiversity, compact city design, commuter-friendliness, and greening urban environments. Investments and policy measures in cities must be grounded in a commitment to sustainability and the pursuit of sustainable development and climate-resilient pathways.

Social protection. Interventions need to focus on addressing the socio-economic impacts on poor and vulnerable people, who have little to no access to safety nets and require social protection as the crisis continues. Many countries have strengthened their social protection systems to respond to COVID-19. In order to build back better from this crisis, social protections need to be sustained in the longer-term, because of the significant long-term welfare impacts on the poor, and to build resilience to future shocks.

Policy and governance. Successful recovery requires a governance system tailored to the requirements of the present circumstances. The

International Recovery Forum 2021: Building Back Better from COVID-19 and Compound Disasters

recovery effort requires an all-of-society approach, with coordinated and complementary actions across sectors and stakeholder groups that go beyond traditional silos. It necessitates diverse financing arrangements to help sustain long-term recovery; therefore, the passage of economic reforms would be necessary.

With regard to legal frameworks, disaster management policies should explicitly include recovery. A science-based climate risk management system should underpin the country's socio-economic recovery towards focused actions on climate change adaptation and mitigation, disaster risk reduction, and sustainable development. Technology and digital solutions must be explored further by the public sector, such as the application of mobile technology for data capture for establishing a national identity system and digital payments, satellite imagery to analyze social issues spatially, and analytics to develop catastrophe insurance products.

Partnership and collaboration. National and local governments cannot undertake recovery alone. Partnerships will be essential to mobilize financial resources; collaborate on identifying solutions among the public and private sectors, civil society organizations, academe, scientific institutions, and local communities; and implement mutual-help strategies. Collaboration will allow for an integrated and transdisciplinary approach to maximize co-benefits and to build back better. The pandemic has exposed some of the costs of interdependence, but these interdependencies offer significant opportunities for recovery through partnership. UCLG reported on the ways in which mutual support between cities have supported response and recovery. The African Union has partnered with UNDP to develop a regional recovery framework from COVID-19 to align continental, regional, and national recovery efforts and leverage synergies within the region.

Data and information management. Quality data and effective information management systems to support assessment and decision-making continue to be a challenge. There is a need to ensure that data are collected and databases are built to make well-informed decisions. Robust data from the national to local level will be required for cross-sectoral analysis and the development of targeted programs and initiatives. Digitalization of information management systems can improve transparency and real time access to services (UNDRR, ESCAP & IRP, 2020).

Conclusion

Countries recovering from COVID-19 and compound disasters face the daunting task of planning and implementing recovery during the ongoing response. Governments have to make timely, appropriate decisions with limited resources to meet immediate needs for recovery and for sustainable outcomes. Recovery planning should address systemic, compound and cascading risks to reduce the impacts of future pandemics and compound disasters. A long-term vision for recovery needs to be developed in alignment with the sustainable development, climate change, and risk reduction agendas. Achieving the appropriate balance between green sustainable climate action and economic progress through economic reforms and risk-informed financial measures will be critical. More importantly, the varied, often disparate impacts of this crisis necessitate a people-centered inclusive recovery that accounts for the unique experiences of the elderly, people with disabilities, women, children, etc.— in addition to jobs and livelihoods. Recovery plans should enable sectors and donors to align activities and budgets and enhance partnership and collaboration at different levels. A fit-for-purpose governance system that emphasizes coordination of all sectors and stakeholders, and focuses on establishing robust information systems is key. More than ever, solidarity within and beyond country borders is fundamental in recovering from COVID-19 and compound disasters.



References

- IRP. (2020). *COVID-19 Recovery Policy Brief*. Kobe: IRP.
- UNDRR, ESCAP & IRP. (2020). *COVID-19: Opportunities for Resilient Recovery*. UNDRR Asia Pacific COVID-19 Brief. Bangkok: UNDRR.
- UNDP. (2020). *COVID-19 Recovery Needs Assessment. Draft Guidance Note*. New York: UNDP.

The forum's full-length video and individual presentations are available on the IRF21 event page on the IRP website:

<https://bit.ly/3t4XCuw>

and the IRP YouTube channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/user/IRPsecretariat>

