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Christchurch's Reconstruction

New Zealand rates pretty well in the development league tables, such as the Human Development Index, being an IMF 'advanced economy', a high income OECD country and so forth, but none of that matters to Mother Nature. We have seen that over the weekend, as we have sat aghast at the unfolding events in Japan, and it's probably the country best prepared to take on natural disasters.

In the last century only one of the deadliest natural disasters has occurred in a developed country. What this means is that we should look to developing country experience of natural disaster recovery to get some insights on how we might respond to the Christchurch earthquake.

I commend to you a book called 'Safer homes, stronger communities: a handbook for reconstructing after Natural Disasters'. It's a World Bank Publication and it might seem a bit developmenty, but here are some of the gems it imparts:

- The lead disaster agency should decide with local government how they will share responsibility and coordinate. To see how we're going, read this.
- Central government should only invoke laws as the situation warrants.
- Local government should decide immediately if land use plans, building codes and regulations need revision. Fair point, but this depends on a seismic survey that will cost just a few million so that must therefore be a huge priority right now.
- Agencies should agree a planning process and timeline together with a public communications strategy.
- Good communications are vital because the affected community should participate in the planning process and in developing a collective vision for reconstruction.
- The community should also be involved in infrastructure decisions and this extends to public facilities, the opening of which help with the community's 'connectedness'.
- A balance needs to be struck between short term recovery interventions in infrastructure to get services running, without cutting across long term interventions that require time and careful planning.
- A two-prong approach is needed so that initial recovery efforts do not overshadow long term planning initiatives

There are many other helpful tips in the book and, if you are interested in further reading, then check out the World Bank's good practice note on "Overall Reconstruction: Design, Implementation and Management" and the "World Bank Global Good Practices in Earthquake Disaster Recovery and Reconstruction".

Overall, there's no shortage of information to be digested so that we can make the new Christchurch the best it can be. What might be in short supply are experienced people who can interpret that information in a New Zealand context without political bias. On that, the jury is still out.



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