Core Concepts of Recovery Planning

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ABSTRACT

In December 2014, the American Planning Association will release its long-awaited Next Generation version of its well-regarded “Green Book” from 1998, Planning for Post-Disaster Recovery and Reconstruction. Certain core, or essential, concepts recur throughout this new version that are important and form the focal point for the new push into recovery planning by the APA Hazards Planning Research Center. This paper outlines both the typology of recovery planning APA has developed and concepts regarding how the scale and spectrum of damages affect expectations regarding the nature of recovery, followed by a brief summary of the most important features of effective recovery plans—establishing goals and policies, managing a healthy process of public engagement, and implementation. Embedded in all this is a need to address the disruptive impacts of climate change through effective adaptation.

Introduction

In 1998, the American Planning Association completed and released what has since become a central document in the literature for practicing urban planners on disaster recovery, Planning Advisory Service Report No. 483/484, Planning for Post-Disaster Recovery and Reconstruction. This report over the past decade and a half reached more than just planners, however; it has also become a valuable reference source on recovery for many people in allied professions, such as emergency managers and city managers. Much of the popularity of this document can be traced to its practical approach to advancing what was still for many people a marginal topic, namely, what communities could at least consider doing in advance of a disaster to better prepare for future hazard events. The dominant motif in this field was to wait for the event and begin to plan for recovery after it had occurred. Even today, while the idea of pre-event planning has gained considerably among planners at all levels of government, it is still far more the exception than the rule.

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Some ten years after the original report was released, APA began to work with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which had funded production of the original Green Book—so-called because of its original cover art—to foster support for the idea of revisiting the assumptions and, more importantly, the content and format of that report to update, overhaul, and rethink the report in order to generate a more current version to meet the needs that have emerged since then. APA conducted a needs assessment for FEMA that identified nine major reasons for undertaking such an effort, and FEMA agreed. In October 2010, APA undertook an entirely new project to write the “Next Generation” version of its guidance on post-disaster recovery. Unlike the first version, however, this project would include a number of web-based resources that could assist planners well before the report was completed, and has included extensive outreach into the planning community. It is anything but the goal of the APA project to let the report sit on the shelf after publication.

Disasters Will Happen

In this respect, it is worth noting that, under the original timetable for the project, the new report would have been issued a year ago. However, the field of planning for hazards is nothing if not dynamic, generating lessons at unexpected times and places, often causing researchers to shift their priorities on the run. In this case, at least in the U.S. context, what happened was Superstorm Sandy. APA chapters in New York and New Jersey, in particular, were begging for assistance in coping with the aftermath. APA responded by organizing its team of primary contributors to the report into an instructional team, spent four months collaborating with those chapters, FEMA personnel, and allied organizations to shape what became a week-long series of training workshops throughout the most affected areas, and then delivered those workshops in the first week of April 2013. Understanding the value of capturing new knowledge in this way, FEMA granted a one-year extension for the project, which eventually extended to the end of 2014 with the addition of some derivative products to enhance the overall project. Following the lead of the Sandy Rebuilding Task Force and its report, issued early this year, APA increased its emphasis in the new Green Book on subjects like green infrastructure and resilience.2

Typology of Disaster Recovery Plans

Perhaps the most critical foundation for disaster recovery planning in the new report is a simple typology that identifies three types of plans related to recovery: operational, policy, and recovery plans. Both operational and policy plans are developed in the pre-disaster period, but operational plans are modeled far more on typical emergency management plans, focusing

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primarily on early stages of recovery with much less emphasis on the long-term recovery issues that are the venue of planners. In contrast, policy plans include those considerations and are exemplified in recent practice by what Florida has labeled Post-Disaster Redevelopment Plans, which grew out of 1993 legislation that mandated such considerations in comprehensive plans in coastal jurisdictions. This form of planning, however, largely gained momentum after the 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons, when FEMA and NOAA helped underwrite a series of prototype planning processes that paved the way for state-level guidance from what was then the Florida Department of Community Affairs. One of the most critical innovations to emerge from this type of plan was the concept of Priority Redevelopment Areas in the Hillsborough County plan for the Tampa Bay area. This idea focuses on the notion that new development after a disaster will largely be redirected to designated safer areas of the county, although some predictable complications emerge in practice. Overall, the idea behind these plans is that there are policies that can be established to guide the recovery process, including the managerial structure for post-disaster recovery, in order to expedite recovery and make the community more resilient in the face of disaster. Among the options is the adoption of a pre-event recovery ordinance that codifies many of these decisions. APA has included a model ordinance online and in the report for this purpose.

In contrast, recovery plans are developed entirely after the disaster and focus on urban design and reconstruction problems based on the actual patterns of damage, which can only be known after the event. The contrast is that this is much more physical planning than policy planning, although policy making that did not take place beforehand can decidedly slow down the process of recovery and sometimes generate conflicts that could have been resolved or ameliorated in blue-sky conditions. In fact, the frequent need to deal with both sets of demands after a disaster precisely because policy issues were not addressed earlier may well be a primary source of delay and confusion in many larger disasters.

**Scale and Spectrum**

It is precisely for that reason that the new APA document also uses a matrix developed by co-author Ken Topping. The purpose of the matrix is to help planners and disaster researchers understand the implications of fundamental differences in the scale and spectrum of damages inflicted by disasters.

The scale defines the geographic range, for example, from a single neighborhood, often the case with any but the very largest tornadoes, on up to an entire region, as exemplified in the most catastrophic hurricanes, such as Katrina and Sandy, or earthquake-triggered tsunami events such as those in the Indian Ocean in 2005 and Japan in 2011. While the differences may

seem somewhat intuitive, a realistic grasp of the practical implications depends significantly upon accumulated knowledge and experience with the recovery process.

Spectrum refers to the intensity of the damage within the area affected, which then affects the nature of the recovery that must be achieved. On the lighter end, this may involve only modest expectations of repair to damaged buildings without necessitating wholesale demolition and reconstruction of entire blocks or neighborhoods. This has implications for the degree of redesign of urban areas, for instance, if a neighborhood or community merely needs to patch up buildings that are for the most part still usable, as was largely the case after the Northridge earthquake in southern California in 1994. In contrast, even an EF-5 tornado affecting a relatively small town like Greensburg, Kansas, entails wholesale rebuilding within that town because very little of the built environment remained standing after the event. This cleared the way for the inspiration to rebuild green, establishing a model for other communities since then, whereas more modest damage might not have induced such visionary thinking about Greensburg’s future.

Conclusion

The report itself, as one might expect, goes on to elaborate in considerable depth the process of developing the goals and policies of recovery plans, involving the public in a transparent and effective process, and then implementing the resulting plan with effective financing, measurement of success, and other practical considerations that cannot be effectively addressed in this short presentation. But these baseline concepts do establish the fundamentals upon which those subsequent details are based. What we hope is that, by making clear the value of pre-disaster planning and establishing an understanding of how differences in the scale and spectrum of damages affect recovery needs, we can move planning practice forward in ways that will help produce more resilient American (and perhaps global) communities. That said, it can be expected that the practical learning process that lies ahead will still be long and tedious, and that someday there may be even a third or fourth generation of this important guidance.