

## Business-as-usual or Building Back Better? Post-disaster recovery of local economies in Japan and Malaysia

### **A. Background of proposed research plan**

A sudden disaster strikes. Townships and cities are under water, roads and power lines are destroyed, critical infrastructure and services are inaccessible. Hundreds die, hundreds of thousands are evacuated, and an entire nation mourns as all of this is played and replayed on national television. Local governments and communities scramble for disaster response. The federal government mobilises and dispatches resources to the ground. Foreign aid arrives in droves.

Weeks pass, then months. Emergency response transitions to restoration, and restoration transitions to reconstruction. Media attention wanes. Vital services resume, and post-disaster debris is cleared. The evacuees slowly return home or relocate, as life continues.

It is at this point in time after the disaster that my proposed research is interested in. As the dust settles and survivors of the disaster continue with life, how does the disrupted economy function to support the livelihoods of communities? Beyond cash transfers and cash-for-work schemes in post-disaster recovery, what are the longer term livelihood and job creation solutions? In the process of rebuilding the local economy, do policymakers and communities utilise the window of opportunity to improve economic structures to provide decent work and strengthen community resilience, with a smaller environmental footprint? Or do planners and implementors return to business-as-usual, whatever the pre-disaster economic model may be?

I propose two case studies for in-depth study on these questions. The first is the Great East Japan Earthquake that happened in 2011 which triggered a tsunami and the meltdown of a nuclear power plant, resulting in about 18,000 deaths, and approximately 470,000 evacuees. The timeframe for recovery is projected to be ten years, and as of 2017 there were still 123,000 displaced (*Japan Times*, March 10, 2017). The second case is the 2014-2015 floods in Malaysia, in which more than RM1bil (about USD250mil) of damages were recorded and 230,000 were evacuated from their homes. As of 2017, there are reports of villagers still waiting for government housing that were pledged (*The Malaysian Insight*, 23 April 2017). In both cases, sufficient time has passed for immediate relief efforts to have ceased, and for recovery to be focusing on redevelopment.

### **B. Purpose of proposed research**

The broad research questions, to be refined upon further work, are the following:

1. What have been the top-down and bottom-up initiatives for economic recovery and livelihood creation after the disasters in Japan and Malaysia? This question focuses on governmental policies and their implementation, as well as grassroots activities of economic self-organisation. What are examples of successes and failures, and why?
2. Do these initiatives build community resilience and adaptive capacities, leading to sustainable development in the long term? What are the enabling factors and challenges faced by the two cases?

3. Based on lessons learnt on the ground, what are the policy recommendations for Building Back Better from the local economic perspective?

### **C. Proposed plan**

At this juncture it may be useful to further unpack the ideas and assumptions within the proposed research.

Firstly, Business-As-Usual (BAU) holds a negative connotation, and a recognition of the flaws within the current economic system that have led to the Anthropocene, transgressed planetary boundaries, and social inequalities and injustices at a global level. BAU in an absolute sense is impossible after a catastrophe, however BAU in our case implies little shift in paradigm, where reconstruction aims to replicate legacy structures to keep the system running as how it was, pre-disaster. As a contrast, Building Back Better, as one of the four priorities within the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, points to building an improved system that is able to better withstand shocks, and an uncertain future brought about by climate change. At the same time, there is a third possibility besides the two offered – what that has been termed “disaster capitalism” (Klein, 2007) where certain parties exploit vulnerabilities post-disaster to push through controversial neoliberal policies which exacerbate inequality and inequity. The proposed research acknowledges this as part of the systemic context (and indeed, as challenges faced), but focuses on initiatives that aim to rebuild for normalcy or a change for the better.

Secondly, economic systems at the local level is chosen as the focal point of study in order to examine the quality of the production and consumption patterns. The level of analysis enables us to move away from macroeconomic indicators such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and instead conduct empirical observations on the psychological, social, and environmental impacts of economic activities on the ground.

Thirdly, Japan and Malaysia are chosen as two Asian cases with strong political economies of clientelism, redistribution and single-party dominance (factors that Aldrich (2016) highlighted as important for uneven governmental distribution of resources after disasters); however there are also salient differences including their stages of development (developed vs. developing) as well as the level of homogeneity in the population (homogeneous vs. heterogeneous). The commonalities and differences between the countries will be illuminating for the purposes of comparison and theory formation.

The proposed plan of study uses the empirical lens of Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) to uncover economic activities that “have explicit social and often environmental objectives, and are guided by principles and practices of cooperation, solidarity, ethics and democratic self-management” (United Nations Task Force for Social and Solidarity Economy, 2014, p.iv). To further guide observations, a systems thinking approach (a la Meadows, 2008) will be used, viewing the economic activities within the context of their respective political economies, and from a supply chain point of view (instead of individual units that produce, consume, and exchange).

The research methodology proposed is expert interviews and ethnographic fieldwork, combined with extensive desk research of secondary data and available literature.

#### **D. Expected results and impacts**

This study will contribute to literature on post-disaster economic recovery that focuses on local economies and a longer term timeframe, as well as SSE from a climate change adaptation perspective. The identified best practices and lessons learnt will be significant as inputs to policymaking for livelihood and job creation after major environmental disasters.

#### **References**

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