Building Back Better in the Cook Islands: A Focus on the Tourism Sector

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Abstract

Building Back Better has become a popular catch-phrase supporting post-disaster recovery efforts, representing reconstruction as an opportunity to improve the resilience of communities. Mannakkara and Wilkinson developed a Framework for Building Back Better (BBB) in 2014 to support implementing BBB practices in post disaster recovery. The Framework serves as a comprehensive guide to improve the physical, social and economic conditions of a community during the rebuild. This research analyses the Cook Islands tourism sector in its largest island Rarotonga and its current disaster management practices with respect to BBB principles. Qualitative data was collected through interviews with key tourism businesses and relevant governmental and private institutions. Analysis of the collected data presented evidence of BBB practices incorporated in the current preparedness and recovery procedures for the businesses and government institutions. Good BBB practices currently performed included: improving structural resilience of physical assets, disaster risk reduction (DRR) awareness and preparation, and supporting psychological and social recovery. The lack of legislative backing and inconsistent communication and collaboration between the government institutions and tourism stakeholders were the main drawbacks preventing proper BBB practices in the Cook Islands.

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1. Introduction

The Cook Islands is comprised of 15 small islands in the Southwest Pacific Ocean [1]. Its capital city and largest island is Rarotonga [2]. Its climate is dominated by the extensive and persistent South Pacific Convergence Zone (SPCZ) which has a major influence on the weather [3]. The intensity and position of the SPCZ, coupled with the natural geography and landscape of the islands have contributed to regular cyclones striking and causing devastation to the small nation including deadly calamities such as Cyclone Martin in October-November 1997 and five destructive cyclones in February-March 2005 [1]. The cyclones have caused over $20 million worth of damages to the country, the majority of which was evident in Rarotonga [4].

Tourism has grown considerably in the Cook Islands and is now the dominant economic sector providing over 60% of the national GDP [5]. The main attractions in the Cook Islands are its beach activities and natural scenery. These natural assets and tourism infrastructure have been regularly affected by the cyclones that have struck the country. The increase in intensity and frequency of disasters have left the country’s tourism industry vulnerable. Multiple initiatives have been explored and implemented over the years to enhance disaster management for the nation. However, there is uncertainty as to whether there are effective disaster recovery plans available that are targeted towards rebuilding and recovering the tourism sector.

As a result of the increasing global trends in disaster events, Building Back Better (BBB) was introduced as a concept advocating a holistic approach to improving the physical, social and economic resilience of communities during post-disaster reconstruction and recovery [6-8]. Despite its beginnings as a catch-phrase following the devastating 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, BBB has now been developed into a clearly defined approach to post-disaster recovery with practical guidance on successful implementation leading towards improved disaster resilience in communities [9]. The Sendai Framework [10] has identified “enhancing disaster preparedness for effective response to Build Back Better in recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction” as one of its four priorities for action.

This paper evaluates the disaster resilience of the tourism sector in Rarotonga using Mannakkara and Wilkinson’s [9, 11] BBB Framework. The paper introduces the framework and the current disaster management practices in the Cook Islands, then presents the research findings from a range of tourism businesses in Rarotonga and organisations involved in tourism and disaster management. The paper concludes by providing recommendations to assist areas that require more resilience-based thinking for BBB.

2. The Build Back Better Framework

Mannakkara and Wilkinson’s BBB framework (figure 1) was developed by building upon the ideas introduced by authors such as Clinton [6], Monday [11] and Kennedy et al. [8]. The framework has since been through several iterations to reflect findings of international case study research and projects done by the researchers. The studies conducted have proven the BBB framework to be a robust tool that is able to assist in planning and implementing a holistic recovery effort to improve resilience at the community-level and sector-level for both natural and man-made disasters.

The modified BBB framework (figure 1) consists of three key elements:

1. Disaster Risk Reduction - Disaster risk reduction (DRR) highlights the need to enhance the resilience of a community’s built environment through (a) Improving the structural resilience of the built environment and physical assets to cater to all possible hazards, whilst being practical to implement through mechanisms to fund design upgrades, use of local resources, and quality assurance [7, 13, 14]; (b) Use of multi-hazard based land-use plans to produce risk maps to determine appropriate land-use and building design solutions [15]; (c) Education of the public, government and all relevant stakeholders about DRR.

2. Community Recovery – Community Recovery includes, (a) Psychological and Social Recovery which addresses improving psychosocial aspects of the community [16-18] by developing social resilience and
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