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Build Back Better says visiting Disaster Resilience DUO

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Sunil C. Perera in Colombo Sri Lanka

The Centre for Disaster Resilience promotes research and scholarly activity that examines the role of building and construction to anticipate and respond to disasters that damage or destroy the built environment. The Centre undertakes a full range of research styles, from fundamental theory building to highly applied and widely disseminated. Holistic solutions to real world problems are facilitated by the flow, interaction and creation of knowledge across multi-disciplinary groups and networks.

The term Resilience has been adopted in an attempt to describe the way in which it is possible to reduce a nation's susceptibility to major incidents of all kinds. Resilience means trying to reduce the probability of these events occurring and their likely effects, and building institutions and structures in such a way as to minimise any possible effects of disruption upon them. Current thinking has it that there are no natural disasters. Hazards give rise to disasters when they coincide with vulnerable populations or infrastructure and hence all disasters, to some degree, are man-made. The denial of the naturalness of disasters is in no way a denial of natural process. Whether a natural event is a disaster or not depends ultimately, however, on its location. A large earthquake in the Hindu Kush may spawn no disaster whatsoever while the same intensity event in California could be a catastrophe. Human induced hazards may include sociological, technological, material and transportation hazards. For example, during and after a period of war, there is a need to focus on the reintegration and rehabilitation needs of conflict affected Internal Displaced People (IDPs), returnees and host communities in conflict affected countries.

Explaining their views on tsunami re-construction project experiences in Sri Lanka, they said that members of the Centre have worked with local Universities, provincial councils and other government agencies to support tsunami building projects.

Dilanthi, who originates from Sri Lanka, said the Centre for Disaster Resilience works with the Chamber of Construction Industry Sri Lanka to train local unskilled persons on construction related employment.

"We provide technical know-how, knowledge transfer, and research aimed at rebuilding communities as well as infrastructure".

The visiting academics will meet local construction people, NGOs and government officials at a public forum this week in Colombo to discuss the challenges associated with Rehabilitation and Reconstruction of the Northern and Eastern provinces.

"There is growing recognition that the construction industry has an important role in helping communities to anticipate, assess, prevent, prepare, respond, and recover from disasters of all types. This process is commonly visualised as a two-phase cycle, with post-disaster recovery informing pre-disaster risk reduction, and vice versa. This illustrates the ongoing process by which governments, businesses, and civil society plan for and reduce the impact of disasters, react during and immediately following a disaster, and take steps to recover after a disaster has occurred. The significance of this concept is its ability to promote the holistic approach as well as to demonstrate the relationship between disasters and development, she said.

Replying to media, Dr. Haigh said recovery and reconstruction are commonly identified within the post-disaster phase, the period that immediately follows after the occurrence of the disaster. Once a disaster has taken place, the first concern is effective recovery; helping all those affected to recover from the immediate effects of the disaster.

Reconstruction involves helping to restore the basic infrastructure and services that the people need so that they can return to the pattern of life which they had before the disaster. The importance of the

transitional phase, linking immediate recovery and long-term reconstruction, is also stressed. With the recovery of social institutions, the economy and major infrastructure, efforts may shift to longer-term recovery and reconstruction.

Within the construction process after a disaster, there is an opportunity to build back better, ensuring risk reduction, resilience, sustainability and community input that are designed into redevelopment.

“The aftermath of armed conflict is frequently characterized by the need for reconstructing damaged infrastructure to sustain recovery as the infrastructure has suffered from damage and neglect during a war and from an absence of new investment. There is usually a great demand for technically trained manpower when massive development projects are launched. Also due to migration, displacement and years of mistrust, communities need to be rebuilt physically, socially and economically”.

According to the duo, the Centre aims to provide advice and guidance for policy makers and practitioners on the role of building and construction to anticipate and respond to unexpected events that damage or destroy the built environment, and reflect construction’s ongoing responsibility toward the built environment’s users.

Responding to questions raised by media they rejected allegations on Sri Lanka and said the IDPs need resettlement and most international agencies are willing to support Sri Lanka on IDPs resettlement.

"Funding is not a problem, if we prepare the right proposal, to the right institution, said Prof Amaratunga added.

The Centre has attracted grants for disaster resilience work from various funding bodies, including the European Commission and professional institutions such as the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors.

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