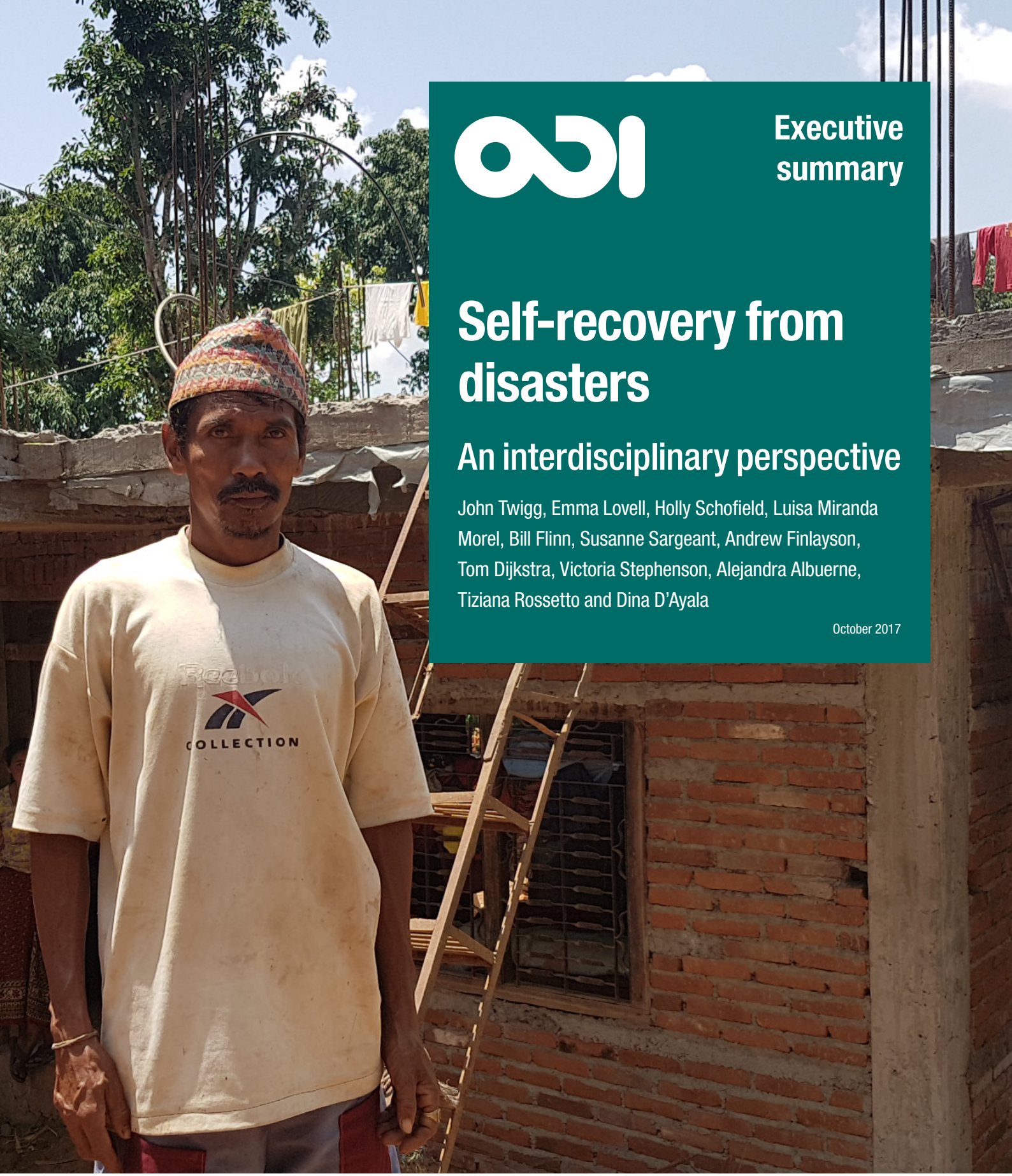


Executive summary

# Self-recovery from disasters

## An interdisciplinary perspective

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# About this project

‘Promoting safer building – Using science, technology, communication and humanitarian practice to support family and community self-recovery’ (November 2016–July 2017). Partners include the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), CARE International UK, University College London (UCL) and the British Geological Survey (BGS). The project is funded by the UK Government’s Global Challenges Research Fund through the UK Natural Environment Research Council, Ref: NE/P016200/1. We would also like to thank the CARE UK Investment Fund for supporting this project.

A full report and translated versions of the Executive summary are available in Nepali and Tagalog (Philippines) here: https://www.odi.org/publications/10963-self-recovery-disasters-interdisciplinary-perspective

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# Executive summary

Humanitarian agencies are increasingly looking to integrate support for self-recovery into post-disaster interventions. Despite a willingness on the part of implementing agencies and partners to place the agency and choice of those affected by a disaster at the core of their interventions, the term 'self-recovery' has yet to be fully defined and elaborated. It is generally used in the humanitarian shelter sector to mean the process whereby disaster-affected households repair, build or rebuild their shelters themselves or through local builders. It has been estimated that international aid agencies' support for housing recovery rarely reaches more than 30% of those affected within the first year after a disaster (Parrack et al., 2014). This poses challenges to aid agencies, one being how to promote the building back of shelters that are safer.

Post-disaster recovery is seen as a critical process in reducing risk and building resilience (Ievers and Bhatia, 2011). Moreover, promoting and ensuring safer reconstruction has long been a key consideration for humanitarian actors aiming to build resilience to natural hazard-related disasters, including those influenced by climate change. These themes are central to the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015–2030), as one of its four pillars is to 'build back better' in recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction (UNISDR, 2015). The term 'build back better', which came out of the response to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, has been regularly invoked in policy as well as operationally in subsequent disasters (Fan, 2013), acknowledging that older notions of recovery as a return to pre-disaster normality merely recreate the conditions of vulnerability that lead to disasters. 'Building back better' also aligns with contemporary understanding of resilience as a positive, transformational capacity or process (Manyena et al., 2011).

This working paper presents the findings from a pilot research project that investigated how disaster-affected households in low- and middle-income countries rebuild their homes in situations where little or no support is available from humanitarian agencies. The project was an interdisciplinary collaboration involving social scientists, geoscientists, structural engineers and humanitarian practitioners. It was led by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), working in partnership with CARE International UK, the British Geological Survey (BGS) and University College London (UCL). This pilot project stepped beyond the limitations of agency post-disaster response evaluations and undertook research to understand self-recovery processes, and how supporting self-recovery can contribute to promoting safer shelter reconstruction.

The work was broad in scope. It investigated households' self-recovery trajectories and the wide range of technical, environmental, institutional and socioeconomic factors influencing them over time. It also considered how safer construction practices can be more effectively integrated into humanitarian shelter responses.

The findings of the working paper draw on a combination of desk research, expert workshops and field studies, including field trips to Nepal (to visit communities affected by the 2015 Gorkha earthquake) and the Philippines (to communities affected by Typhoon Haima, known locally as Lawin, in 2016, and Typhoon Haiyan, known locally as Yolanda, in 2013). Findings were shared and debated through in-country workshops, international conferences, and academic and practitioner networks. The research was exploratory, seen as a foundation for longer-term research and action to support self-recovery processes.

## Key findings

- **Context:** the governmental, economic, environmental and socio-cultural contexts in which self-recovery takes place greatly affect how it progresses. Availability and application of reconstruction grants are influenced by government conditions. Recovery often takes place in multi-hazard environments. Socioeconomic differences and levels of community organisation have an effect on access to, and use of, resources.
- **Drivers and barriers to self-recovery:** many different influences contribute to the overall progression of self-recovery or to progress being held back. Important factors include households' changing needs and priorities, livelihood pressures, psycho-social reactions to disaster, and the level of technical skills and knowledge available.
- **Build back safer:** the process of reconstruction in self-recovery is multi-faceted, involving complex decision-making and priority setting by affected individuals and households. It is also influenced by external resources, support and regulations.
- **Interdisciplinarity:** effective support for self-recovery requires humanitarian and other actors to take an interdisciplinary approach to both design and implementation of interventions.

## Context

The role of government in post-disaster response greatly affects the way in which people self-recover. In Nepal, government grant conditionality required specific reconstruction work to be undertaken in order for grant tranches to be awarded. However, a shortfall between the expected cost of work and allocated tranches hindered progress towards reconstruction and self-recovery. Conversely, in the Philippines, decentralised grant distribution systems and less strict conditionality meant that financial support was used more flexibly by recipients, ultimately promoting a relatively rapid and successful self-recovery process.

The environmental context has a strong influence on recovery trajectories and strategies. In Nepal and the Philippines, the communities that were visited experienced a range of different hazards. Access to roads, services, transportation of goods and communications technology also varied considerably. Moreover, the frequency of hazard events influenced the perception of risk felt by the communities, which in turn influenced their reaction to the disaster and ultimately their recovery. Communities demonstrated a degree of resilience in dealing with frequent hazard events (such as monsoon landslides or the typhoon season). Less frequent, high-impact events (the Gorkha earthquake and Typhoon Haiyan) resulted in a severe loss of resilience at the household level, and a reduced capacity for individuals to respond to other shocks and stresses post-disaster.

The social, economic and cultural context within which recovery occurred influenced inequalities, differential access to information and services, power relations and belief systems, which in turn affected households' ability to self-recover. Community organisation had a strong influence on how individuals viewed and acted in terms of their own personal recovery process. The Filipino tradition of *bayanihan*, or community cohesion and mutual support, was said to have greatly facilitated community recovery. In Nepal, community organisation was also common, although seemingly less formalised.

## Drivers and barriers to self-recovery

Families and communities recovering from disasters set priorities and take decisions based on the knowledge they have, their needs and their means. They consistently express a desire to be in control of their own recovery process. The exercise of choice, ownership and empowerment is central to the concept of supporting self-recovery, and a challenge for assisting agencies is how to facilitate this greater freedom of choice. The degree of access to knowledge and technical assistance affects the extent and nature of recovery. Priorities can shift as time goes by, influencing families' recovery pathways: shelter may be a priority initially, livelihoods may soon replace it. A consistent theme was communities' view of recovery as a process of preparedness for the next event, and factors such as trauma were a barrier to this process.

## Build back safer

In both countries, the Global Shelter Cluster, in coordination with the government, promoted a series of build back safer (BBS) messages for incorporating appropriate improved construction techniques into recovery. Uptake of BBS varied widely, depending on the level of compliance with building codes required by governments, the amount of financial support available, the extent of access to materials and technical assistance, and local perceptions and priorities regarding safety.

## Interdisciplinarity

This interdisciplinary project involved engineers, geoscientists, social scientists and humanitarian practitioners. This reflects the multi-faceted nature of humanitarian response and the need for cross-sector programming to support and promote successful self-recovery. The findings of the study reinforce the need for aid actors to develop interdisciplinary strategies for intervening in a post-disaster context.

## Next steps

This pilot study has extended our understanding of self-recovery by identifying some of its features and the factors affecting it, but the concept of self-recovery itself needs further refinement and clarification. 'Self-recovery' cannot be seen in isolation from other aspects of household and community recovery because, as this project's research shows, these are integrally linked. Moreover, the term is open to a variety of interpretations, depending on different knowledge, experiences and perspectives. There is a clear requirement for future work that builds on these initial findings to develop deeper understanding of the factors involved in self-recovery and means of supporting it.

In pursuit of this goal, the project team has initiated two next steps:

- A **16-month research project** has commenced, funded by the British Academy, to increase understanding of self-recovery in urban contexts in the same two countries, Nepal and the Philippines.[1]
- A **Global Shelter Cluster working group** has been set up, led by CARE International, to pursue the promotion of safer reconstruction and self-recovery. Key objectives include exploring how humanitarian actors are promoting this, and how it can be improved in the future.

Self-recovery is acknowledged as being highly significant in post-disaster recovery processes, but at the same time it is not well understood, either by humanitarian or government actors and donors. An approach that supports families on their own self-recovery pathway can have an impact on the majority that self-recover, increasing the safety of their homes and improving their resilience to environmental shocks and stresses.

This working paper presents one of the first studies to describe and understand the process of self-recovery, through original, independent research. It highlights that self-recovery is an inevitable and complex process. Understanding it better and developing humanitarian interventions that support families and communities on their pathways to recovery has the potential to dramatically influence humanitarian practice and contribute to long-term resilience.

1 'Safer self-recovery: promoting resilient urban reconstruction after disasters' (September 2017–January 2019). Funded by the Global Challenges Research Fund through the British Academy (Ref. CI170172).

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