

Recovering: Values and Approaches in New York after 9/11

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Despite our mitigating efforts, many disasters – natural and man-made – will occur. Therefore long-term recovery management must be a vital component of disaster reduction.

9/11 was an urban disaster with tremendous impact. Physical destruction and damage on 9/11 was limited to a small geographic area, but economic and social damage was widespread and prolonged. My study of efforts in New York following the events of September 11, 2001 examines three dimensions of recovery: physical, economic and social. The overarching goal is recovery of individuals (life, or social recovery), and there are many direct approaches to achieve that goal. But the physical and economic dimensions of recovery contribute indirectly to achieving the goal of individual recovery.

In the case of 9/11 emergency response programs of government were oriented towards natural disasters, and were completely inadequate to respond to large-scale economic losses and social needs in a major urban center. Intergovernmental relations provided flexible funding from the federal government for programs that were locally developed and managed. But a number of groups were not well served by government recovery programs, including very small businesses, low-wage earners, those located outside of Lower Manhattan, those in the informal economy and immigrants. Philanthropy

provided supplemental funding for programs serving these groups and for human services associated with social recovery.

Nongovernmental organizations proved crucial and creative leadership was needed in order to improvise.

Clean-up of the World Trade Center site proceeded more quickly than expected, and no one wanted a clean site sitting empty without a plan for recovery. So there was tremendous pressure to proceed quickly with physical and economic recovery. Expedience won out over deliberation, but at the price of many unintended consequences.

Five years after 9/11, recovery on all fronts is unfinished. Newly-elected government officials promise a fresh look at existing programs and plans. Going forward, the greatest challenge is to connect the economic, physical and social dimensions so as to achieve a comprehensive recovery.