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## **BUILD BACK BETTER - PRINCIPLE OF SAVING LIVES**

*The principle “build back better” means striving to strengthen the resilience of communities, societies and states against the consequences of extraordinary situations by correcting previous organizational, political, social and physical shortcomings. The goal of resilience in accordance with the “build back better” principle is to improve, rather than repeating a pre-existing condition and thus to contribute to more effective protection of lives. The principle has been formulated in international documents stipulating that effective recovery and reconstruction globally should be recognized as an imperative for saving lives and further sustainable development. To be successful, “build back better” programs require a high degree of political will, strong institutional frameworks and intensified international cooperation. The authors analyzed the “build back better” principle in regard of “black swan” unpredictable damaging situations, natural disasters and manmade situations such as armed conflict.*

**Keywords:** *build back better, saving lives, catastrophes, reducing future risks, improving previous shortcomings, black swans*

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## **1. Introduction**

Emergencies are periods of increasing loss of human lives that are often characterized as enormous, unnecessary, tragic, sudden, unpredictable. When there are emergencies caused either by natural disasters or by human negligence (manmade), it begins to be very clear what were the shortcomings in the socio-organizational and technical-physical sense that have led to undesirable consequences of considerable scale. But in many cases, that's what remains, critical analysis back which often ends at dissatisfaction with what has (not)been achieved before. Unfortunately, it does not always and everywhere lead to incentives for change. However, this is also the possible turning point when dissatisfaction with the previous situations, and the realization that it led to catastrophic consequences in emergencies, can and must grow into an effort invested in repair, i.e. elimination of all perceived shortcomings.

## **2. Human lives in emergencies, risk hazards, and prevention**

Exposure of people and property to disasters in all countries is growing faster than their vulnerability is decreasing (United Nations Office for Disaster Reduction, 2009). This creates new risks and gradually increases disaster-induced losses, with significant economic, social, health, cultural, and environmental impacts during the short, medium, and long term, especially at the local community level.

Human lives are lost when measures are not taken in time to prevent and reduce the consequences of earthquakes, floods, fires, armed conflicts, infectious diseases of pandemic dimensions, economic decline, lack of vital resources, primarily food, drinking water, medicine. Lives are lost not only during emergencies, i.e. in moments of crisis but also after them due to the consequences of health risks, economic and human insecurity. This loss of human lives due to emergencies is the most serious warning of the need for prevention based on a critical analysis of previous shortcomings, the need to change them, and thus achieve previously organized resistance to their consequences. Failure to take prevention with the easiness that emergency situations will probably not happen again and that the only important thing is to normalize life by returning to the previous state, directly endangers the basic right of all people, the right to life.

With a critical look back, the activities are undertaken in the present, actually achieve the prevention of hard, even the most severe consequences in the future. It is not just about improvements of the physical and technical type, because along with noticing the shortcomings of that type, there are also shortcomings within the socio-organizational,

political domain. Non-democratic, non-egalitarian, more or less openly systematic discriminatory relations, where the respect and protection of lives, basic human freedoms and rights did not become the cornerstone of human and sustainable social development (Kambovski 2018: 32), institutional inefficiency, disorganization, unclear or often variable competencies, and responsibilities, unfair distribution of vital resources, etc., can also have a significant impact on the occurrence of extensive consequences of emergencies. Tensions between political, humanitarian, and military goals are possible as part of integrated multi-agency stabilization efforts, especially due to the increase in the number of organizations and individuals operating in the same area. Also, governmental documents are needed (and practices based on them) that regulate the reception and distribution of international aid, as well as the engagement of domestic military, police forces, and civilian resources and their mandates and coordinated action (Australian Government, Australian Civil – Military Center, 2015). Pandemic measures during 2020 indicate that there may be a need for a temporary reduction of human rights, but this should also be done in a legitimate way, through institutional procedures, while respecting, above all, the right to life. States cannot derogate some rights, such as the right to life, prohibition of torture, ill-treatment, prohibition of slavery (Tilovska-Kechedji, 2020: 627).

When it comes to natural disaster prevention (and human rights saving), the first thing that comes to mind is seismically resistant construction against earthquakes; better coastal fortifications and sewerage networks as a way to prevent the consequences of floods; an improved warning system as a way of informing all, especially remote communities, possibly affected by the tsunami; when large-scale infectious diseases occur, only a well-equipped and organized health system provides the right answers. So, at the present moment, it is necessary to build well everything that was previously not good enough to prevent loss of human lives and other catastrophic consequences of emergency situations in past cases. Obviously, it is much easier to organize and implement improvements of that type, i.e. physical and technical circumstances that have been proven as weak points in emergency situations.

Improving social relations is much more difficult, because it is not easy to achieve the consensus needed for their realization, as it always is when coming to changes in power relations and the potential redistribution and diminution of acquired privileges. Consensus on the necessity of change is, as a rule, much easier to achieve in the first type of improvement. The second type is more difficult to change due to conservative inertia based on the destructive idea that it is sufficient to return to common, familiar patterns and frameworks of social life. There is usually a refusal to realize that they may have

contributed the most to the emergencies and the resulting extensiveness of the consequences. It is not rare to hear open statements as allegedly is just not optimal to invest in “unnecessary innovations” but instead is the best to re-optimize existing relationships. (Barass, 2017: 10)

### **3. Recovery: key questions and answers**

Asking direct questions regarding recovery after the consequences of emergencies, and giving answers to them, indicates the need for adequate prevention.

Why do wars break out most often in those areas, and regions where war conflicts have taken place in the last decade? Because for good, lasting peace is necessary to be made with equal participation of all interested parties, instead of those who only partially cared about the ceasefire, withdrawal of demarcation lines, counting of weapons and ammunition, but not about the human dimension of security in those areas.

Why do members of international humanitarian organizations, without previous criminal records, become on the ground while committing tasks of repairing the consequences of emergency situations, criminal perpetrators of various types of gender-based violence, sexual, transactional, physical type? Because these organizations lacked prior enactment of strict prohibition and sanctioning rules, with prior training on the inadmissibility of such conduct, because there is still too few female staff with little authority in these organizations because gender-based violence has always been present in countries, affected by emergencies, which could provide men, both foreign and local, a false sense of impunity on all sides for acts of gender-based violence.

Why do small entrepreneurs fail en masse and poor social strata and individuals become even poorer in emergencies? Because state fiscal mechanisms are not designed to mitigate the economic consequences of emergencies. If there is a shortage of food, drinking water, and medicine in areas in times of crisis, it is not because there are real shortages, but because their safe storage and reserves are not organized before emergencies occur, and because their distribution and transport is not pre-crisis efficiently organized.

Why do disproportionately more women than men die in tsunamis (in the 2004 Asian tsunami, as many as 70% of the victims were women and children)? Because they were not involved in all phases of defending communities from disasters, they were uninformed, unauthorized, untrained, without the means necessary for protection and evacuation, without the mandate to make decisions about themselves and their families,

much less about their communities. Social hierarchies mediated by gender sometimes mean that women and girls have lower social status and face greater threats of insecurity due to the vulnerability of their status (Valasek, 2008: 125). They as children grow up in an environment that did not respect their opinion, did not have the opportunity to communicate and can fully realize their full intellectual and every other potential, and thus did not grow into independent, responsible persons who can be an example to others (Ćorić, 2019: 45).

Respect for the right to life and its protection is at the same time the main motivating factor in correcting previous shortcomings and raising the level of readiness to face future emergencies. The vulnerability of women in disasters is caused by the emergency situation, the accompanying increase in gender-based violence, various types of crime, lack of vital resources, but also the existing gender inequality in social relations. Consequently, policies, instruments, mechanisms, and tools used in response to disasters cannot be gender-neutral, and should not be formulated and implemented without considering specific gender differences (Oxfam-GB, 2011).

#### **4. Build Back Better and the Black Swans**

“Black swan” is a metaphor that describes a surprising, unexpected event with significant consequences (if you have only seen white swans all your life, it does not mean that black swans do not exist, therefore the black one appearance may surprise you). “Black Swan” is an event that has two characteristics: it is unexpected and it causes great and lasting consequences. Retroactively analyzing, there was a reasonable explanation, that the event in fact could have been predicted, but the set did not happen and the event was not expected, because the prediction was missing. The “black swans” have high-profile consequences hard-to-predict, and these are rare events that are beyond the realm of normal expectations based on history, science, finance, and technology. There are also psychological biases making people blind, both individually and collectively, to uncertainty and a rare event's massive role in social affairs (Taleb, 2010). “Black swans” are unexpected, unpredictable, and significantly comprehensive phenomena, firstly noticed and defined in technical practices, mechanical engineering, technology, and construction building, and later the term began to be applied to the domain of finance, banking, and global economy, from where it was taken by social sciences. The term was accepted for all those phenomena that were considered very difficult or almost impossible to predict, but as the later analysis found, it was however, at least partially possible to be prevented and even learning how to live with them. (Papić, 2018).

The risk of unpredictable events exists in every society, they slow down sustainable development, and their occurrence in one region can cause damage and chain consequences in other regions and vice versa (Čović, 2015: 14). In order the concept of “build back better” to function in the shadow of possible occurrences of “black swans”, the important component is predicting the risks and consequences of emergencies, which is an urgent global priority (AlJazeera, 2017), as prevention of maybe complete or at least partial surprise. Therefore, in terms of forecasting and lives saving, an important element is learning lessons from past disasters, which can significantly reduce the phenomenon called “black swans”. This indicates the importance of accepting and learning the lessons of the past that are necessary today to adequately respond to the challenges that emergencies may pose.

The negative impact of risk, in addition to depending on the characteristics and intensity of the unexpected event, largely depends on the vulnerability and capacity of people who are exposed to disasters (Todorović, Milošević, Bugarski, 2015: 58). Therefore, recovery is much more than a simple return to the pre-event state. Recovery must be approached in a cyclical way by taking action to strengthen anticipation and resilience, both before and after future disasters - instead of a linear approach that limits recovery action to post-disaster response only. e.g. to react directly to its consequences, in response to an event that has already happened. When saving lives and repairing the greatest damage is completed, communities face a long process of gradually returning all that has been lost. This recovery should be a combination of the community's efforts to simply return to normalcy as quickly as possible with the long-term goal of reducing future risks and vulnerabilities. It is also an opportunity not only to reduce the risk of the same or similar dangerous events, but also of other dangers and conditions that did not have any impact on a specific catastrophic event, but which may endanger that community in future. In Serbia, too, it is emphasized that reducing the risk of emergencies requires a strong institutional basis, which can be achieved through capacity building, good governance, promotion of appropriate program policies and legislation, facilitated the flow of information, and efficient coordination mechanisms (Čović, 2015: 14).

### **5. Build Back Better - Armed Conflict**

When war breaks out, the risk that this society will again go through future violent armed conflicts increases significantly (Peters, 2016: 55). It is worrying that precisely those states that originated from, or emerged after wars are more likely than all others to repeat conflicts. During the 2000s, 90% of conflicts were in war-torn countries, and the rate of conflict recovery has increased every decade since 1960. Empirical analysis of eight

decades of international crises shows that various peacebuilding efforts often fail to really end conflicts, being effective only in the short term. involving only short or longer ceasefires, but being unsuccessful in achieving long-term peace.

Many studies suggest that there is a direct link between women's decision-making power over peace and conflict, and the likelihood of war. For example, the results of analyzes that found that a higher degree of women's participation in parliaments reduces the risks of civil war are cited. Another analysis, using data on international crises over four decades, found that as the percentage of women in parliament increased by 5%, the state was five times less likely to use violence when faced with an international crisis. Regarding the political violence committed by the state, statistical analysis of data from most countries of the world in the period 1977-1996. indicates that the higher the percentage of women in parliament, the lower the probability that civil servants will committ crimes of human rights violations, such as murders of political oponents, political imprisonment, torture, murder, kidnapping, and people disappearances.

But just as women's empowerment is associated with a reduced likelihood of conflict, the statistical analysis also shows that strengthening women's political and social participation reduces the chances of conflict again after the end of the war. In particular, increasing parliamentary representation and women's literacy reduces the risk of the country experiencing civil war again. A study of 58 countries affected by the conflict between 1980 and 2003 found that when no women are represented in parliament, the risk of recurrence increases over time, but “when 35% of parliament is female, this relationship virtually disappears, and the risk of recurrence is close to zero” (O'Reilly, 2015: 57).

Contemporary analyzes show that in societies where women are engaged in many public spheres of life, countries are less likely to have armed conflicts with their neighbors, be in bad relations with the international community, or have significant zones of crime and violence within their society. The mechanism of that causality itself is still not completely clear, but it is obvious that gender equality is a better indicator of the peace of the state than other, already mentioned factors such as democracy, religion, or GDP. Similarly, in a number of empirical studies, gender inequality has been identified as a sure predictor of increasing possibility of armed conflict either between or within states. In particular, fourteen out of the seventeen countries at the bottom of the OECD Gender Discrimination Index have had conflict in the last two decades. War-ravaged Syria, for example, had, before the outbreak of conflict, the third most discriminatory institutions among 108 countries surveyed - women face legal and social restrictions on their freedom of

movement, only men can be legal guardians of their children in most communities, and judges can approve marriage for girls under 13 years of age.

Statistical analysis of the largest set of data on the position of women in the world today shows that the situation of women's physical security better predicts the peace of their countries than its achieved level of democracy, GDP, or level of religiosity (Peters, 2016: 14). When family law structures - such as those governing the minimum age for marriage, property and inheritance rights, or divorce and guardianship rights - discriminate against women, it is also one indicator of a country's propensity for conflict and the fragility of its peace. (Peters, 2016: 55).

Countries with a larger number of women in parliament are certainly, less involved in interstate or civil wars, and less likely to tolerate human rights violations in the family area (Nanako, O'Reilly, 2018: 16). Empirical evidence is compelling: where women's political inclusion is achieved, peace is more likely - especially when women can and influence decision-making on peace agreements (United States Institute of Peace, 2018). Strategic commitment and activities should include the transition from hazard protection to risk management by combining risk prevention and sustainable development, what is fully applicable to this type of emergency (Čović, 2015: 11).

## **6. Build Back Better - natural disasters**

In addition to the challenges of the corona virus pandemic, during 2020 the planet faced a large number of natural disasters and extreme weather events. The world was hit by 980 natural disasters in 2020, which caused the loss of at least 8,200 human lives (Al Jazeera Balkans, 2021). Not only great number of human lives were lost, floods, hurricanes, storms, torrents, fires left behind material damage estimated as 210 billion USA dollars. These extreme weather events caused by climate change are becoming more frequent, but also more intense, as a result of which the damage they cause is extremely large. The mentioned losses of 210 billion dollars are significantly greater than the material damage due to natural disasters in 2019 when it amounted to 166 billion. In addition to the mentioned material losses, which in 2020 were higher than ever before, a huge number of lives were lost, many plant and animal species lost their habitats, and many people were forced to evacuate (Stanković, 2021).

Disasters can occur suddenly (fast onset: typhoons, earthquakes, volcanoes) or gradually (slow onset: climate change, drought, desertification, gradual melting of polar glaciers). They affect millions of people (Mršević and Janković, 2018: 403). Over the last decade,



they have affected nearly 2 billion people and caused damage estimated at \$ 1.7 trillion. In addition, from 2008 to 2012, 144 million people were displaced due to disasters. Disasters, most of which have been exacerbated by climate change and which are increasing in frequency and intensity, are largely hampering progress towards sustainable development.

The steady increase in disaster risk, including increasing human and property risk exposure, combined with previous disaster experience, indicates the need to further strengthen disaster preparedness, take predictive action, integrate disaster risk reduction into response preparation, and ensure that there are capacities for effective response and recovery of both people and property.

Disasters to date have shown that the recovery, rehabilitation, and reconstruction phases must be prepared before emergencies occur, which is a critical moment for the application of the “build back better” concept, including the integration of disaster risk reduction into development measures, all of which make nations and communities resilient to disasters.

Resilience is defined as the ability of a system, community, or society exposed to hazards to resist, absorb, transform, recover and adapt to the effects of hazards in a timely and effective manner, including through preserving and restoring its basic structures and risk management function (United Nations, 2016). It is important to understand that strengthening resilience is not only achieved through better coastal fortifications and similar physical and organizational environmental improvements but also through changes in discriminatory social relations, especially undemocratic, non-transparent, and gender unequal (Mršević and Janković, 2018: 409). Namely, in agrarian societies, most often affected by disasters, women are significantly underrepresented in politics, institutions, social organizations, and all forms of activism (Đurašinović, 2019). Countries that are most positive towards women's leadership and the concept of gender equality in general, e.g. Nordic countries such as Norway, Sweden, Finland (Đurašinović, 2019), and other post-industrial countries, are in recent decades very rarely or not at all affected by disasters of catastrophic consequences and massive human lives loss, which clearly indicates that these phenomena are conditioned by nature but also by social relations.

Therefore, it is necessary to emphasize that recovery is much more than a return to the state before the event that caused the emergency situation. Recovery for disaster-affected communities should not only reduce the risk of the same or similar hazardous events, but

also to identification of other hazards and conditions that had no impact on the recent event but could endanger that community in future.

### **7. Build Back Better - messages of international standards**

Japan is considered the world's leading model regarding the disaster risk reduction - but even in this well-organized country, “black swans” occur as a deadly combination of multiple dangers, so there have happened catastrophes of enormous proportions. That is why Japan is also the leading initiator of global disaster risk reduction strategies, from the Yokohama Strategy 1994 (United Nations - Headquarters, 1994), through the 2004 Hyogo Framework to the Sendai Disaster Risk Reduction Framework 2015-2030. (United Nations Office for Disaster Reduction, 2015). Recovery from the “triple” disasters that hit Japan, the devastating earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster in Fukushima 2011, represent lessons on the urgency of disaster risk reduction and the imperative inclusiveness of the process. The damage caused by these catastrophes was too great even for one of the most economically developed countries in the world. Therefore, it is not difficult to imagine how dangerous the situation is in places where people are poor and live in homes made of fragile materials with insufficient stocks of food, drinking water, medicaments and without publicly organized efficient health services. The risks are higher in poor countries for poor people - but the strategies are the same. Everywhere on earth, the risk is reduced by identifying and adequately responding to risk factors impetus (United Nations Office for Disaster Reduction, 2013).

The principle coined by international documents, as “build back better”, includes efforts to strengthen the resilience of communities, societies, and states from the consequences of disasters by correcting previous shortcomings. This principle firstly attracted global attention after the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami. This finding resulted in the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) which clearly called for “the introduction of disaster risk reduction measures” into disaster recovery and rehabilitation processes and the use of opportunities even during the recovery phase to develop long-term capacity to reduce the risk of future disasters. Effective recovery and reconstruction are now globally recognized as imperative for sustainable development. To be successful, recovery and reconstruction programs require a high degree of political will, strong institutional frameworks, and intensified international cooperation, all of which provide greater opportunities for risk reduction and resilience building, as well as a greater chance for recovery and reconstruction to be implemented effectively. a way that avoids negative consequences (UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction, 2015). In Serbia, unfortunately in the official report on the implementation of the Hyogo Declaration in the

period 2013-2015. year there are no significant allegations of positive activities in the field of a gender perspective in the process of risk reduction. The report states that no measures have been applied in Serbia that would contribute to recognizing gender sensitivity in the process of recovery of the endangered community. It is clear that there still is plenty rooms for improvement the work of protection and rescue actors and other stakeholders in this area (Radović, 2015: 26).

An example of the inclusiveness of the Sendai framework that builds on the previous Hyogo is its Priority 4, Improvement of Disaster Preparedness for Effective Immediate Disaster Response as well as “Build Back Better” during recovery, rehabilitation, and reconstruction phases. Namely, the constant growth of disaster risk, including increasing exposure of people and property, combined with lessons learned from past disasters, indicates the need to further strengthen disaster preparedness in response to them, undertaking forecasting activities, integrating disaster risk reduction in response preparation and ensuring the existence of capacity for effective response and recovery at all levels. “Build Back Better”, dictates the need to empower the entire population, including the hitherto often excluded women, the elderly people and people with disabilities, to run public affairs and to promote gender equality and universally accessible response, recovery, rehabilitation, and reconstruction that are crucial.

Perhaps paradoxically, but disasters are not only moments of women’s suffering but are also an opportunity to women empowerment (Oxfam-GB, 2011). Emergencies are also an opportunity for women's role and status in the community to be changed, especially during the period of renewal and reconstruction. Just as seismically unsafe facilities are no longer built on that unstable ground after the earthquake, but instead seismically resistant facilities, with the aim the damages not to be repeated, so gender relations after disasters should be renewed and changed in order greater gender equality to be achieved.

## **8. Conclusion**

Disasters to date have shown that human lives saving, recovery, rehabilitation, and reconstruction phases must be prepared before emergencies occur, which is a critical moment for the application of the “build back better” concept, including the integration of disaster risk reduction into development measures, all of which make nations and communities resilient to disasters. Human lives are far more endangered by emergencies by increasing multiple risks than is the case when the condition is regular. Therefore, the text underlines the need to adopt and apply the concept of “build back better”, which means by noticing the shortcomings that led to human losses and other serious

consequences, necessity to work on their improvement, with a critical look back. These are activities undertaken in the present, with intention to preventing or at least mitigating, the occurrence of the consequences of emergencies in the future. It is not just about improvements of the physical and technical type, because along with noticing the shortcomings of that type, there are also shortcomings in the socio-organizational, political sense. Regarding the protection and of human lives saving, there is stressed necessity of anticipating and preventing the so-called “black swans” as the most unexpected social dysfunctions, total “jumps out from normalcy”, but also burst of armed conflicts and natural disasters of catastrophic proportions. Acceptable solutions are offered by international standards, e.g. as comprised in the documents of Hyogo and Sendai frameworks, which also emphasize the need for consistent application of the concept of “build back better”. Its application is necessary for all phases of emergency situations, during and after the events, but also, in the phase of recovery and reconstruction, with the perspective of future validity the prevention of future similar emergencies. Understanding and accepting the messages of the lessons learned are also the most valuable basis for applying the principle of “build back better” as a possible context for effective protection and human lives saving (Mršević and Janković, 2019: 288).

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