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Abstract:

Following the 26 December 2004 tsunami disaster around the Indian Ocean, many organisations and governments involved in the reconstruction subscribed to the phrase "build back better". Different definitions and interpretations of this phrase led to widely varying actions and outcomes in the ongoing reconstruction, particularly with regards to shelter and settlement. Drawing on field experience from Aceh, Indonesia and Sri Lanka, this paper examines disaster mitigation lessons from the theory and practice of "build back better", discussed in three categories:

1. Different meanings of "better".
2. Expectations raised.
3. Thinking beyond tsunamis.

The framing used is the combination of disaster relief principles articulated in 1982 and the tsunami "build back better" propositions developed in 2006. Based on the field evidence, alternative phrases are proposed and discussed. Overall, the most significant concern with "build back better" is that it tried but failed to invent a new concept for post-disaster aid and instead caused confusion and practical difficulties in post-tsunami disaster relief and disaster mitigation, creating problems which should not have arisen given previous knowledge and experience.