

# **The role of community leadership in disaster recovery projects:**

## **Tsunami lessons from Japan**

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### **Abstract**

While project management has been effectively applied to many fields and sectors, disaster management has yet to see its full benefits. This inductive study generates insights about the nature and role of ‘active leadership’ (LaBrosse, 2007) in the context of a community led recovery project in Minami-sanriku, Japan, an area affected by the 2011 tsunami. Community leaders displayed ‘active leadership’ evidenced in 1) the effective identification of project objectives and relevant stakeholders, 2) the efficient management of stakeholder engagement and 3) the robust understanding of the socio-cultural context in which the Nagasuka Beach Recovery Project took place. This multi-disciplinary and inductive study highlights the need to train project managers (be they community leaders or otherwise) in both technical and soft leadership skills: the former ensure that Project Management methodologies are clearly understood and applied; the latter facilitate the adaptation of these methodologies to the specific socio-cultural locales in which recovery projects take place.

**Key words:** ‘Active leadership’; Stakeholder management; Community leaders; Disaster recovery projects; Case study; Japanese culture

### **1. Introduction**

While the project management approach has been effectively applied to many fields and sectors, disaster management has yet to see its full benefits. This state of affairs is due to the fact that disaster recovery projects have unique features such as emergent strategies, uncertainty, time urgency, community vulnerability and stakeholder issues and, therefore, pose different challenges when compared to typical projects (Baroudi and Rapp, 2014; Crawford et al, 2012). Olshansky et al (2012) argue that time compression makes disasters unique and distorts the disciplinary lenses that would work under normal circumstances. This requires a more contextualised application of project management methodologies and trans-disciplinary research rather than discipline bound studies. Our study draws on project management, disaster management and organisation theory to inductively develop insights grounded in empirical realities.

Although disaster management has been described by some commentators as a form of public project management (Moe and Pathranarakul, 2006), the application of project management to disaster projects remains limited to immediate, aid-type fast responses rather than to medium and longer term recovery projects. Our study documents the application of aspects of project management in a medium term recovery project, namely the Nagasuka Beach Recovery Project based in Minami-sanriku (an area in Japan that was hit and severely impacted by the 2011 tsunami). Our overall objective is to explore the meanings and working of ‘active leadership’ (a project management concept coined by LaBrosse in 2007) in this community-based recovery project and the extent to which it contributes to the success of the project.

We do so by asking two research questions:

Q1) How does ‘active leadership’ work in the context of Nagasuka Beach Recovery Project?

Q2) What is the relationship between ‘active leadership’ and the outcome of the project?

The research was carried out between November 2013 and November, 2015. Its focus was on the role played by the local community leaders (who became project leaders) in engaging, liaising and managing multiple stakeholders while accounting for the socio-cultural context in which the project took place. We are not the first researchers to argue that ‘active leadership’ is at the heart of effective stakeholder engagement and management in recovery projects (Baroudi and Rapp, 2014). We contribute to this body of literature by documenting how ‘active leadership’ was enacted by the Minami-sanriku community leaders managing the Nagasuka beach recovery project and how this process facilitated the success of the project.

The paper starts with a literature review of the main stakeholders involved in disaster recovery efforts and extant stakeholder issues identified by current research. It then reviews state of art research on the role of project management approaches in disaster recovery projects, highlighting a specific gap in the literature with regards to role of ‘active leadership’ in managing stakeholder engagement in community-based recovery projects. General and specific background information about the case study is then provided, along with a discussion of why the case was selected and how the data was collected and analysed. The main findings are outlined, followed by a discussion of the contribution made by study to bridging the fields of project management and disaster recovery, its limitations and future areas for research.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Stakeholders involved in disaster recovery**

A great deal of research investigates the role of various stakeholders in disaster recovery such as business organisations, government, NGOs, volunteer groups, international agencies as well as the role of the disaster stricken community itself.

Business organisations are one of the most important stakeholders in the process of recovery.

An important strand of the literature on disaster recovery focuses on the restoration and recovery of business organisations. Studies of reinstating order in the retail system (Fujioka, 2012; Ilie, 2011; Khazai et al., 2011) and of managing supply chains in crisis situations (Bradley, 2014; Day et al, 2012; Holguin-Veras et al, 2014; Kumar and Havey, 2013; Park et al, 2013; Mackenzie et al, 2012; Matsuo, 2015) abound. These studies contribute to a better understanding of the recovery process, as business continuity and disaster recovery are often intertwined. However, these studies focus on large businesses and global supply chains.

Smaller businesses have received less attention in the literature despite the fact that they are the backbone of the economy (Marshall and Schrank, 2014). Research on SME recovery tends to take either a macro-economic perspective (Chang et al, 2010) or a community based approach (Olshanky and Chang, 2009; Olshansky et al, 2012), rather than seeing recovery of small businesses as an iterative process in the context of individual, family/household, and community recovery which unfolds over time (Marshall and Schrank, 2014).

Another strand of research identifies the important roles of government, NGOs, volunteer groups and other international agencies (Avenell, 2012; Bosner, 2012; Ismail et al 2014a; 2014b; Von Meding et al 2009; Sazanami, 1998; Takayose, 1999) in aiding the disaster recovery, especially in terms of handling disaster relief, funding, infrastructure rebuilding and the quick deployment of relevant agencies. Critics are quick to point to the shortfalls of government-led recovery and the inefficiency of the traditional model of top-down governance (Hayashi, 2012; Sorensen and Funck, 2007), in terms of its inability to understand and meet the needs of the local community (Murakami and Wood, 2014) due to

inadequate leadership (Matsumura, 2011). For example, Comerio's (1998) research on urban housing recovery raises important questions about the role of government, arguing for a fundamental rethinking of government relationships with the communities affected, while Olshansky's et al (2006) question the ability of current government approaches to bridge regional and national policies with local planning and reconstruction decisions.

Community involvement is also seen by many authors as an important ingredient in the successful management of disaster recovery (Aldrich, 2011; Ireni-saban, 2012; Murphy, 2007; Shaw, 2014; Takazawa and Williams, 2011; Vallance, 2011; Yusui, 2007). Research by Evans (2002) shows that the Japanese practice of Machi-zukuri (community-based planning) worked well in one of the districts in Kobe due to the fact that there was a high level of civic activism already in place; However, in another Kobe district that was reconstructed after the 1995 Hanshin earthquake and which had low activism levels, the government had appropriated the rhetoric of Machi-zukuri within a more conventional model of urban planning and reconstruction. Despite inconclusive evidence, Machi-zukuri is argued to be radically different from the traditional top-down model that remains dominant in Japan (Matanle, 2011; Sorensen and Funk, 2007). Recent studies (Ireni-Saban, 2012; Murakami and Wood, 2014; Okada et al 2013) suggest that community-based decision making is an effective approach in terms of understanding local needs and enhancing resilience (Plough et al 2013; Chandra et al 2013) in disaster rebuilding with the view to 'build back better'. The concept of 'building back better' has received much attention from scholars of disaster recovery strategies and policy makers in recent years (Alexander, 2006; Clinton, 2006; Fan, 2013; Kennedy et al, 2008; Lloyd-Jones, 2007; Mannakkara and Wilkinson, 2012). Central to these debates is the acknowledgement that communities must drive their own recovery working in partnership with other relevant stakeholders (Baroudi and Rapp, 2014; Cole and Buckle, 2004), a point also embraced by our study.

## **2.2. Stakeholder issues in disaster recovery projects**

As the literature above demonstrates, disaster recovery projects require the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders. The successful engagement and management of multiple stakeholders is seen to be a key element, as many other aspects of the recovery process will depend on it. For example, Chang et al's (2010, p. 247) study on disasters in Australia, China and Indonesia finds that the success of solving resourcing issues "depends on multi-stakeholder collaboration and the development of policies, plans, and tools to allow market flexibility, donor management and government intervention." Similarly, Von Meding et al's (2009) study on NGOs as one of the key stakeholders in disaster reconstruction projects concludes that NGOs encounter significant barriers in liaising with other stakeholders and implementing their tasks, and calls for the development of *a competency-based reconstruction theory* (which combines the fields of disaster management, strategic management and project management) to serve as the basis for the introduction of best practises to be followed by all stakeholders involved in reconstruction projects.

A study by Ingram et al (2006) highlights the need to balance short and long term needs (that relate to community vulnerability reduction) in the context in which governments are pressurised to make rapid responses that may have a negative impact on the longer term development of the community. This short/long term tension becomes a dilemma that requires negotiation across multiple stakeholders. A recent study by Baroudi and Rapp (2014) identified a number of stakeholder issues in disaster recovery projects from a contractor perspective. The research suggests that practitioners need to consider the potential conflict between stakeholders' interests and improve stakeholder management to avoid any negative impact on the success of the project. Their findings support research carried out by Mannakkara and Wilkinson (2013, p2) who argue that "the ability to achieve 'build back better' during recovery is dependent on stakeholder operation" and this requires better

stakeholder management in terms of clear roles and responsibilities, better information exchange and proper training for project managers.

### **2.3.The project management approach and the role of ‘active leadership’ in disaster recovery projects**

According to much of the literature, stakeholder issues represent a key challenge in disaster recovery projects. The effective management of stakeholders becomes more critical and urgent in crisis situations when compared to conventional projects. Many scholars have identified the important role that a project management approach to stakeholder management plays in disaster recovery projects (Baroudi and Rapp, 2011; Baroudi and Rapp, 2012; Hidayat and Egbu, 2010; Ismail et al., 2014a, 2014b). In response to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the Project Management Institute has developed project management methodologies for post disaster reconstruction for those who “provide the kind of leadership and clarity of thought needed to help in the reconstruction effort” (PMI, 2005, p1). While the methodology has been recognised by many as helpful, it has also attracted criticism from scholars such as Pant and Baroudi (2008) who argue that it places too much emphasis on technical skills and ignores the soft skills needed for managing projects.

Ismail et al’s (2014a, 2014b) research on project management methodologies for post-disaster reconstruction highlights a number of critical success factors that contribute to the performance of international NGOs in post-disaster recovery projects. The research finds that one of the most influential factors in the success of project delivery is stakeholder capacity. Another study by Hidayat and Egbu (2010) which investigates the role of project management in disaster recovery projects stresses the management of project stakeholders, along with interface issues and effective communication amongst stakeholders as the most important aspects of effective project management. Baroudi and Rapp (2011) provide a

comprehensive review of disaster responses and recovery operations from a project management perspective and highlight the important role of project stakeholders. While such research regards project management methodologies and approaches as central to successful recovery and reconstruction projects, other studies appear to be more sceptical.

For example, research by Crawford et al (2012) on the Queensland floods in 2011 examined institutionalised discourses concerning policies, procedures and structures for disaster management with the view to identify the role of project management in disaster recovery projects. Their findings suggest that project management played a minor role in the disaster recovery project studied, as conventional project management tools were too bureaucratic and time consuming to suit a situation that required a rapid response. They argued for the need to rethink the role of project management in building capacity for disaster resilience by paying more attention to the special features of disaster recovery and adapting project management tools to the recovery context (Crawford et al., 2012).

Despite a considerable literature on disaster recovery and the recognition of the role of project management in disaster recovery projects (Baroudi and Rapp, 2011; Hidayat and Egbu, 2010; Ismail et al, 2014a, 2014b), there are very few in-depth cases studies that examine the role of stakeholder engagement and management in community-based disaster recovery projects. Although research on the Victorian Bushfires from 2009 by Leadbeater (2013) demonstrates the critical importance of local community leaders in disaster situations and their capacity to shape and drive disaster recovery, the study does not explore the link between community leadership and project management methodologies applicable to disaster recovery projects. Our research addresses this gap by focusing on the role of 'active leadership' (LaBrosse, 2007) in stakeholder engagement and management within the context of a community-based beach recovery project.



LaBrosse (2007) identifies a number of key tenets of project management relevant to disaster recovery projects, one of which is ‘active leadership’. She argues that “hope comes from ‘active leadership’. In the disaster recovery effort it is important to give people a safe environment where they can communicate and share their fears and concerns” (2007, p89). ‘Active leadership’ is seen as key to rebuilding social capital (Dhillon and Randle, 2004) and bridging service provision and community needs in the planning and the delivery of the reconstruction (Healey, 2009; Nakagawa and Shaw, 2004; Olcott and Oliver, 2014; Olshansky et al., 2006). The concept presupposes both soft skills as well as technical skills: soft skills are essential in communicating and collaborating with stakeholders while technical skills are key to meeting the project objectives. Community leaders/project managers who display ‘active leadership’ are capable of aligning and managing the needs of all relevant stakeholders as well as meeting the objectives of the recovery projects within the local socio cultural context in which the project is located. Our study explores how ‘active leadership’ was performed by community leaders turned project leaders in the case of the Nagasuka Beach Recovery Project, from Minami-sanriku, Japan.

In the next section we provide information about the magnitude and the severe impact of the 2011 earthquake and Tsunami on the Japanese environment, economy, social relations and individual psychology, focusing on the area of Minami-sanriku in order to foreground the context of our case study: the Nagasuka Beach Recovery Project.

### **3. Background to the case study**

On March 11, 2011, the largest ever earthquake and ensuing tsunami and nuclear crisis hit the North-eastern areas of Japan. The earthquake had a magnitude of 9.0 and the tsunami waves reached heights of up to 40.5 m. The large scale of this disaster (see table 1) renders the

recovery process very challenging, requiring the involvement of multiple stakeholders and a long term approach for its success.

Table 1 based on data from the National Police Agency of Japan (2016)

Human casualties	15,894 deaths	6,152 injured	2,561 missing
Buildings	121,805 totally collapsed	278,521 half collapsed	726,146 partially damaged

In addition to economic and environmental impacts, the 2011 disaster has had a deep effect on the Japanese social relationships and individual mind set. Survey data indicate fundamental changes in the values and life styles of the Japanese people. A NHK report by Takahashi and Masaki (2012) on the Japanese mind set before and after the disaster found significant changes in family values. After the tsunami, people emphasised the importance of family ties and strong social relationships. The expression of affection and benevolence also intensified post tsunami along with the significance individuals placed on their local community. Another survey initiated by the Cabinet Office (Uchida et al, 2013) on the changes in attitudes in the youth (people in their 20s and 30s) found that people tended to value social connectedness and ordinary life more after the disaster and reverted to some extent to traditional values. These softer aspects need to be taken into consideration as they are part of the socio-cultural context in which the recovery project under the study took place.

The Japanese government set up in 2012 the Reconstruction Agency and allocated 263 billion US dollars for a period of intensive reconstruction (2012-2015) and a revitalisation period (2015-2020). The reconstruction includes physical and mental care, community development, industry revival as well as providing health support (Reconstruction Agency website, 2016). Although much has been achieved, a number of serious problems still remain, such as the

slow relocation of residential and commercial areas and the uneven recovery and development across different prefectures and towns. Given the scale of the reconstruction, some projects were given priority at the expense of others due to limited resources. Minami-sanriku, the town where our case study was conducted, is one of the disaster-affected areas where the government-led reconstruction has been rather slow.

Surrounded by mountains and facing the Pacific Ocean, Minami-sanriku has a population of about 17,000 people, being a relatively small town in the Miyagi prefecture with fishing and marine product processing as its main industries. According to the Minami-sanriku official webpage (2016), the tsunami claimed 778 lives; 3,143 buildings were completely destroyed and 9,746 people were evacuated and spread across 33 different facilities such as schools and community halls. The tsunami also destroyed other important facilities, such as roads, schools, hospitals, shopping facilities and the two kilometre long Nagasuka beach. Prior to the tsunami, the Nagasuka Beach was used as a recreation space for families and also acted as a significant community space for local celebrations and festivals. The beach which was once a beautiful stretch of golden sand was both buried under a huge amount of debris and significantly shrunken by the tsunami (see Picture 1).

Picture 1: Nagasuka Beach after the Tsunami

(Source:<https://sites.google.com/site/kanshamiyagi/home/minamisanriku>)



Given that the local government services were temporarily interrupted by the tsunami and the support from central government took a long time to materialise, communities had to find resources from within in order to start their own recovery projects. Community leaders assumed a central role in starting and managing recovery projects. These insiders were trusted by the local community and had the drive and determination to make positive changes. The Nagasuka Beach Recovery Project, like other recovery projects in Minami-sanriku, including Sun Sun Shopping Street Project and The Blue Tourism Project, was initiated by community leaders in response to the needs and wishes of the local community.

#### **4. Research methodology**

A single qualitative case study focusing on the beach recovery project was selected in order to allow for an in-depth exploration of the relationship between ‘active leadership’ and the success of the project. Qualitative case studies are becoming more accepted in the field of operations and project management (Barratt et al, 2011). Yin (2014) defines the case study

as a strategy of research that focuses on a contemporary phenomenon within its wider context and uses multiple methods and sources of data. He argues that single case studies are useful when they are ‘revelatory’, i.e., when the researcher is in a position to observe and analyse a phenomenon previously inaccessible to inquiry (Yin, 2014, p.52). As a tsunami of this magnitude happens every 1000 years, it is important to document its consequences and learn revelatory lessons for the future.

Another vital trait of our case selection is the social and environmental significance of the project. The case is both about clearing up marine debris and about the reconstruction of a bathing beach which used to serve many social purposes in the community. The negative impact of the debris resulting from the Japanese tsunami has been noted by several scholars (Ghaderi and Henderson, 2013; McIlgorm et al, 2011; Murray et al, 2015). Official reports also show that more than 5 million tons of debris was swept from the land and coastal systems into the ocean (Ministry of the Environment, Japan, 2014) and this will have harmful social, economic and environmental consequences. Therefore, the beach recovery project is an essential part of the post tsunami recovery effort and its success has wide ramifications for the communities affected, the environment and the local economy.

Our case study relies on a variety of methods of data collection and data sources. Primary data was collected via participant observation and interviews with 5 community leaders and 15 volunteers involved in the Nagasuka Beach Recovery Project. Although we did not interview government officials, we attended four meetings in which both community leaders and government official were present.

The interviews were conducted in Japanese by the third author. They were transcribed and translated into English by the second author. We also carried out twenty three days of observation in situ. An initial three day field trip in November 2013 was followed by twelve

days of observation in 2014 (via three field trips) and eight days in 2015 (via two field trips). The fieldwork allowed us to build trust with the community and deepen our understanding of the case study. More than one hundred pages of field notes were transcribed though not all of them were relevant to the beach recovery project discussed in this article.

We also collected secondary data (visual and narrative) from local newspapers, official reports and websites to ensure the triangulation of qualitative methods. This process along with source, analyst and theory triangulation (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 1999) allowed us to build internal validity and construct robust theoretical themes. Ethical clearance for the study was granted by the Japanese university involved in this project.

We used content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980) to analyse the interview transcripts, the observation notes and the secondary data in a systematic fashion. We employed emerging coding (Haney et al, 1998) in order to arrive at our main categories. The process involved all three authors reviewing the data independently to create a checklist. We then compared notes and reconciled the few differences that were present in the initial checklists. Finally, we used a consolidated checklist that contained the main categories to be applied when coding the data. At the end of the process common themes emerged which were then ‘thickened’ and given conceptual rigour by comparing them with sources from the Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMI, 2013).

#### **4.1.Data analysis**

The data suggested that the community leaders managing the project displayed a mix of technical and soft skills in line with an active form leadership. Technical skills ensured that they were able to effectively identify project objective and relevant stakeholders. Soft skills ensured that they managed efficiently stakeholder engagement in accordance to the socio-

cultural context of the Nagasuka Beach Recovery Project. This ultimately ensured the success of the project, as defined by the end users (local community and other visitors to the beach).

‘Active leadership’ appeared to unfold in three particular ways: 1) in the way community leaders identified the objectives of the project and the relevant stakeholders; 2) in how they managed project stakeholders and 3) in the ways they accounted for the socio cultural context of the project.

#### **4.2.The identification of project objective and relevant stakeholders**

To identify the stakeholders early in the project and understand their expectations and potential influence are critical factors for project success (PMI, 2013), as stakeholder issues are one of the biggest challenges in disaster recovery projects. The Nagasuka Beach Recovery Project was triggered by a school trip to Onna Beach, Okinawa involving twenty three local children. The trip was organised in 2012 by the Tsunagari organisation. Despite enjoying the experience, the children voiced their wish to swim in their own local beach. According to the Miyaki Prefecture government website (2013):

“The children were so happy. They had local Okinawa food, played at the seaside, cheered at the beach, spoke with local people in Onna, Okinawa. They had a wonderful trip in Okinawa. When they came back to Utatsu, children were asked to write a trip reflection diary in which they wrote: ‘...I want to swim in our local sea. No matter how good the seaside in Okinawa is, the sea in Utatsu is still the best because it is the sea of our hometown’. That was the voice from the children.”

This message echoes the words of one of the community leaders:

“Onna-son is one of the popular beaches that attract young people....we organized for more than twenty children to have a holiday there in 2012. We came back with a lot

of nice pictures and the children were asked to write their thoughts and feelings about the trip. They wrote that: “it is beautiful, but it is not as beautiful as ours”

(Community leader 2).

The innocent statements made by these children ignited the determination of a number of community leaders and of the Tsunagari Non-profit organisation to start the project. One of the Tsunagari leaders who then became a project leader said: “We decided to clean up the beach two hours every Saturday afternoon and we kept doing this regardless of the weather, sunny or rainy” (Community leader 1). The project started on March 11, 2013 and was completed at the beginning of the summer holiday on July 20th, 2013 when the beach was opened to the public for the summer. It re-opened again in 2014 and 2015 during the summer season.

With the children identified as main stakeholders, the objective of the project was to reclaim the beach as a place for individual fun and community activities. The community leaders understood the importance of responding to the needs and wishes of the main stakeholders. As one of the community leaders said “we did it to fulfil the dreams of our local children because if such dreams come true, the community becomes more united and resilient in its attempts to build back” (Community leader 2).

Community leaders were insiders and, therefore, in an ideal position to identify relevant stakeholders due to their hands on knowledge of the place, a clear understanding of the urgency of the situation and of the limited availability of community resources. One of their strategies was volunteer recruitment. Volunteers thus became another important stakeholder for the success of the project as leaders realised that “the government has some other priorities to consider rather than this beach recovery project” (Community leader 4) and the only left option was self-support. They used “the technique of meeting for identifying the



stakeholders” (PMI, 2013, p.393) to plan and develop strategies for publicising the project in order to attract more stakeholders such as volunteers, organisations and schools students.

The success of their approach was evidenced in the recruitment of 3000 volunteers for the beach clean-up operation and the fund-raising campaign to build facilities such as the car park, shower rooms, emergency routes and so on. The project was publicised using multi-channels such as the Tsunagari Facebook, the Tsunagari project webpage, local newspapers, the Miyagi Tourism Restoration Support Centre and via volunteer recruitment presentations. As the Miyagi Tourism Restoration Support Centre webpage (2013) states “more and more volunteers are joining the beach restoration project to work with a group of 50 local school children entitled ‘Tsunagari Minami-sanriku Sea Monkeys’ to clean-up the beach regularly each Saturday”. (<http://miyagikanko2011.blog.fc2.com/blog-entry-368.html>.)

Unlike conventional projects, careful planning of stakeholder engagement was not always practical due to the urgency and uncertain nature of the project. Nevertheless, the community leaders’ determination and their active role in identifying stakeholders inspired many people to take part in the cleaning operation and to work hard. One of the local volunteers said about community leaders: “...they supported us in the wake of the earthquake... they were concerned about us so we should now work even harder to deserve their concern” (Volunteer 2). This indicates the positive impact community leaders have had on the morale and work ethics of the local community.

The local children, the main stakeholders of this recovery project, were joined by other stakeholders such as high school children from the Kawagoe Nishi High School, Saitama Prefecture, by victims from Fukushima as well as by volunteers from other parts of Japan and from the United States. As well as building a passionate and committed voluntary work force, the beach cleaning project gave local children and young people a sense of pride and

ownership of a local amenity that they valued while also facilitating new social bonds and allowing friendships to blossom thus strengthening the human fabric of the local community and its ties with the outside world.

### **4.3.The management of stakeholder engagement**

While the early identification of stakeholders is important, managing the stakeholders' expectations and any conflicts that may arise could be rather challenging. Local children expected to have their beach back while the government had a plan in place to build a protective seawall, which would affect the children's beach. As one of the community leaders accounts,

“I kept thinking how I can retain the beach. As a tie for fishermen or for the kids, I wanted to do something to revitalize the beach... There was a high possibility of the beach being removed in the government original plan of building the seawall. If the plan were implemented, it would be too late to disagree, so we needed to try our best get on with it.” (Community leader 4)

This account shows the conflict between the perceived interests of the local community and the government. Community leaders were aware of the conflict and the urgent need for taking action as suggested below:

“The government has a disaster seawall construction plan in place and this could have a serious impact on our bathing beach. We had many discussions with the relevant authorities and asked whether it was possible to keep our bathing beach. They acknowledged the great efforts that were made to clean and restore the beach and promised they would do their best to retain the bathing beach when implementing the seawall reconstruction” (Community leader 3).

Community leaders made concerted efforts to talk with various government committees to ensure that the needs of the local community and their expectations would be accounted for in the seawall plan. This is shown by one of leaders' accounts:

“We collected signatures and expressed our collective concern to the relevant government agencies in writing. We also raised our concerns in various seminars held at Oya, Kesennuma City which were held to discuss how to construct the seawall to prevent future disasters. We debated how to construct the seawall but also how to protect the environment and our beach. Without such collective discussion, we would have never realized that there were so many issues to consider. We must always think positively and look for ways to do things better” (Community leader 4).

Community leaders stressed the centrality and the importance of a two-way communication with the government. However, in order to engage effectively with the government, it was important to understand the government immediate concerns and priorities of reconstruction. Thus, community leaders attended various meetings and seminars organised by the government with the view to ensure support for their project and pre-empt unnecessary crises. Attending various relevant seminars allowed the project leaders to gain a better understanding of the challenges facing the government even though at times they did not necessarily agree with them. In the words of one of them: “you should be aware of problems even if you disagree with the government” (Community leader 5).

Apart from resolving conflicts and managing expectations, community leaders also demonstrated an ability to coordinate and harmonise all stakeholders towards the achievement of the project objectives. For example, some volunteer groups were doing beach debris clean-up, others were in charge of fund-raising, while others were working to publicise the project to attract more volunteers (Tsunagari Non-profit Organisation website, 2013). It

was, therefore necessary, for community leaders to use Project Management techniques and tools (communication methods, interpersonal skills, management skills) for managing stakeholder engagement (Project Management Institute, 2013) to ensure that everyone pulled in the same direction and embraced fully the objectives of the project. As one of the community leaders said, “Without well-meaning collaborative efforts, it is hard to make any progress” (Community leader 4). Moreover, setting clear and achievable targets to ensure that “we all worked together towards one direction” (Community leader 5) was an essential part of their approach to stakeholder management.

Despite of lack of formal training in project management, community leaders demonstrated an ability to plan a sequence of activities and ensure access to needed machinery in order to speed up the operation. In the words of a community leader:

“When cleaning up the debris, we started with debris of very large size and shipped it to higher ground, then dug out the mud to collect smaller debris. A lot of tsunami debris was dug out such as boats parts, construction materials, ropes and fish nets and so on but we felt that the more we dug, the more the debris still remained to be collected. Later, we used excavators lent by one of our volunteers which greatly accelerated the process. The mud was dug around one metre in depth to see whether there were any nails or broken glasses that could be harmful” (Community leader 1).

The cleaning operation was relentless, as tsunami debris continued to wash up from the sea to the beach and therefore people still kept cleaning up the debris to ensure the beach was safe, which required ongoing efforts and persistence and motivation.

According to LaBrosse (2007) giving people hope is a central feature of ‘active leadership’ in disaster recovery projects. This requires soft social skills such as compassion and understanding of the local culture. Leaders need to show empathy towards stakeholders,

given that many of them have been and may still be distressed by the human and material losses they had incurred. They need to instil hope and share each success: “People need to see, hear, smell and taste success-even small victories matter” (LaBrosse, 2007, p.89). The leaders under the study displayed ‘active leadership’ by enthusing local people and volunteers and giving them hope in a better future to be built through collective efforts. As one of community members said: “participation gives me a sense of achievement, if I do not do anything, I will worry too much about my future, my family, my children... this gives me a sense of fullness and changes my mood...the leaders gave us hope and the opportunity to prove that we can do it” (Volunteer 5). This indicates that soft skills were very important in managing the beach cleaning project.

The project leaders also displayed a long term approach to bridging the needs of the community with the demands of the government.

“Basically if we do not articulate our own opinions, then we end up being silent. If you are silent, silence means consent. Therefore we should articulate our expectations for regional development and we should have a long-term plan. Even when the reconstruction is completed, the plan would establish a solid foundation for future development. If we are silent we might lose our beach, we might lose our community’ (Community leader 2).

The approach they took to express such long term concerns and to manage their relationship with the government was heavily influenced by the socio cultural environment in which they operated.

#### **4.4.The influence of socio-cultural context on the Nagasuka Beach Recovery Project**

A long termist view and a continuous improvement approach are at the heart of Japanese mind set. Coupled with a collectivist culture (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005) and Kyo-jo, a collaborative way of working (Kiyomiya et al, 2013), accounting for these cultural elements contributed significantly to the success of the Nagasuka Beach Recovery Project. Research by Takahashi and Masaki (2012) also found that increased social knots and communal solidarity enhance the opportunity for success. In the words of one of the community leaders:

“The experience from the adjacent town provided stimulation and motivation for us. When we saw the volunteers from outside Minami-sanriku making such a great effort for our town, we did not want to lag behind. In addition, the very close links between our local people are the main driving force in our disaster recovery” (Community leader 3) .

However, the bottom-up approach exhibited in this recovery project goes against the Japanese culture that is hierarchical, authoritarian and seniority based (Kondo, 1990). Therefore, the social skills which are needed for an effective dialogue with the government which adopts a top-down approach to disaster recovery and is seniority driven, cannot be under estimated. Indeed, while militant in terms of ensuring that the needs of the community are heard and accounted for, community leaders did not employ a direct confrontation style with the authorities. As one of community leaders said:

“Young people’s voices are not paid much attention and are disregarded by the senior hierarchy. The government mind set is that these things are not for the young people to decide upon.... I find it quite hard to talk about such things.” (Community leader 4)

When we asked if there were any disagreements with the government regarding the future of the beach, the answers were not as direct as we hoped:

“Rather than saying agreement or disagreement, it would be better to say that the government had some other priorities to consider rather than this one. We are a community project, it is hard for us to operate as we would like and always get agreement from government” (Community leader 4).

When realising that the government had different priorities for disaster recovery, the attitude of the community leaders was not to wait for official plans to be put into operation but to find a bottom-up solution and do things themselves with the resources available in the community.

The Nagasuka Beach Recovery Project has been judged as successful by the local community (the main project stakeholder) as the short term objective of project was achieved and children’s dreams were fulfilled (Tsunagari Project, Video 3, 2013). The beach opened to the public as planned on 20th of July 2013 with a lot of cheering children around (see Picture 2).

Picture 2: The opening of the beach

(Source:<https://sites.google.com/site/kanshamiyagi/home/minamisanriku>)



One of the local volunteers recounted his feelings at the reopening of the beach:

“When the beach was reopened, the children were so excited rushing towards the sea. We all felt excited as it was our own efforts that rebuilt the beach. We probably would have never thought about rebuilding our bathing beach as it was too challenging but it was the leading role of our community leaders and the incredible support from our volunteers that made this happen”(Volunteer 1)

This sense of achievement had been echoed by various news broadcasts of the re-opening of the beach shown in the video 1 and video 2 (Facebook of Tsunagari Non-profit Organization, Tsunagari つながり, 2013) together with the many pictures of smiling faces published by the weekly on-line Kokoro Press (2013). As this is a seasonal beach, it is always closed to the public at the end of the school summer holiday. The ceremony that marked the yearly closure of the beach featured colourful balloons launched in the air and an invitation to come back the following year (see Picture 3).

Picture 3: The beach closure ceremony

(Source:<https://sites.google.com/site/kanshamiyagi/home/minamisanriku>)





While the trigger and the success of this recovery project has a great deal to do with the wishes and the determination of the local community to have their beautiful beach back, it is important to acknowledge the significant role played by the project leaders (i.e., community leaders) in identifying, engaging and managing the project stakeholders. Compared to conventional projects, this recovery project placed tougher demands on the project leaders. They had to set and meet project objectives and manage stakeholders relations according to these objectives in the context in which the main stakeholder (the community) was still in distress and therefore vulnerable. Furthermore, their decisions were at time restricted by the authoritative, hierarchical and seniority-based culture in which the project unfolded. Therefore, the social skills needed to navigate effectively such a complex social and cultural map were as important if not more important than the technical skills required in the management of conventional projects. Labelled as ‘active leadership’ by LaBrosse (2007), this form of project leadership is more complex and more tuned to the socio-cultural context in which the project takes place than the leadership required by conventional projects. Although community leaders have applied some elements of project management in this beach recovery project, these had to be adapted to the disaster situation and performed in a more culturally sensitive manner.

## **Conclusions**

As Johnson and Hayashi (2012) suggested, the complexities of disaster recovery projects cannot be captured by sitting within one discipline. Rather, multi-disciplinary approaches are needed, along with mixed research methodologies that give voice to multiple stakeholders while accounting for the institutional, cultural and social context in which recovery projects are managed. This study responds to this call by drawing on theoretical insights from project management, disaster management and organisation theory as well as by employing a variety

of research methods -interviews, observations and document examination- to shed light on the role of ‘active leadership’ in the success of the Nagasuka beach recovery project.

Our findings suggest that some key elements of Project Management have been applied by the community leaders from Minami-sanriku such as identifying project objectives and relevant stakeholders and managing stakeholder expectations and conflicts. While this conventional project management framework was a useful platform for implementing recovery practice, it also required soft skills to adapt project management approaches to the socio-cultural context in which the recovery project took place.

The theoretical contribution of the study resides in highlighting the important role of ‘active leadership’ in community led recovery projects. ‘Active leadership’ was found to be essential in meeting the project objectives and managing the project stakeholders in a way that resonated with the specific socio-cultural context. ‘Active leadership’ requires a mixture of technical and soft skills.

It is widely accepted that project leaders must be given training in project management methodology if disaster recovery projects are to become more successful: “when you have strong project management practises in place being driven by well-trained people, managing these disaster relief efforts becomes much simpler” (Killough, 2011, p5). We suggest that the type of project management training given to people who manage disaster recovery projects must also account for the specific socio-cultural context in which the recovery is taking place. Technical skills alone are not sufficient and must be supplemented by social skills. In conventional projects, the training tends to focus on the standards and practices accredited by the Project Management Institute (Gillard, 2009). While such skills are also important in disaster recovery projects, social skills are essential in establishing resonance with the communities affected by the disaster and building on their strengths and resources. Finally,

recognising that the community is the main stakeholder in disaster recovery projects is the starting point for effective stakeholder management and for adapting project management tools to the socio cultural context in which the recovery is taking place.

The study is not without limitations. We did not interview any government officials and did not rely on quantitative evidence in our theorising. However, our theoretical findings are informed by a multi-disciplinary approach and a robust qualitative case study methodology. While not generalizable to larger populations, they provide much needed intellectual and pragmatic tools and insights to help project managers orient themselves better in the real world of managing disaster recovery projects. The main managerial implication of the study is to highlight the need to train project leaders (be they community leaders or NGOs) in the ‘active leadership’ skills that are needed to successfully manage disaster recovery projects. Future research needs to be undertaken to investigate, on a wider scale and in different cultures, the role of ‘active leadership’ in disaster recovery projects and evaluate to what extent ‘active leadership’ training enhances project leaders’ competency and ability to adapt project management tools and methodologies to the needs of the socio-cultural context and the community.

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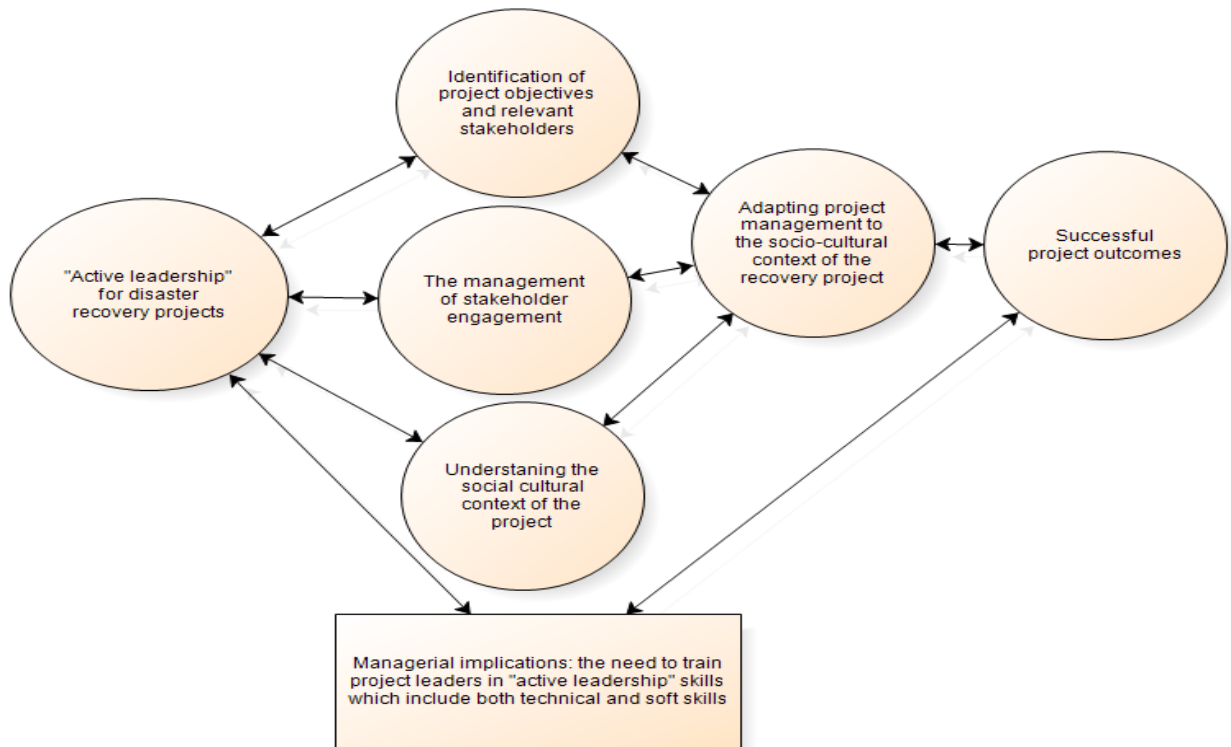
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## Appendix

### Graphical abstract:



### Highlights:

- Community leaders practised “active leadership” in the Nagasuka Beach Recovery Project.
- Their “active leadership” was key to managing multiple stakeholders.
- Project management was adapted to the socio-cultural context of Minami-sanriku.
- There was a clear link between active leadership and the success of the Recovery Project.